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THE HALF SISTERS.

A Tale.

BY

GERALDINE ENDOR JEWSBURY.

AUTHOR OF "ZÖE."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE HALF SISTERS.

CHAPTER I.


LORD MELTON, on leaving Bianca's presence, mounted his horse, and rode towards the Park to meditate a little on the singular commission he had accepted, and to get, if possible, a little composure into his soul.

He did not exactly hope to find Conrad fickle, for he loved Bianca too truly not to desire her happiness beyond all things; but he could not get rid of his human nature sufficiently, to endure any one to do her happiness but himself. With all his loyalty and generosity, he found he had undertaken a task much harder than he had imagined, whilst stimulated by the presence of Bianca, and the sight of her tears. He would have been thankful for an excuse to quarrel with Conrad, and felt for a few minutes as if he could have shot him with great satisfaction; but instead of that he was

obliged to go in search of him, speak civilly, and invite him to dinner!—a trial to have ruffled the torpid well-broken nature of any saint, and Lord Melton had never felt so un-saintlike as at that moment. He was savage at himself for having accepted a position of so little dignity; his wounded love for Bianca, his wounded love for himself, his jealousy of Conrad and indignation at his conduct to Bianca, all combined to produce (we are sorry to record so unheroic a fact) a dreadful fit of ill humour—unmitigated by the slightest gleam of self-complacency from the countenance of any of the virtuous motives which had incited him to the undertaking; indeed, for the time being, they were pleased to buffet and torment him, as if they had been so many devils.

With all this, however, he remained firm in his resolution to perform all that Bianca had required; the consciousness that it was for her sake, and at her request, was the only thought that soothed his irritated mind. He was not up to encountering Conrad just then, however; so, turning his horse's head, he put it into a gallop, and never stopped until he found himself near Wandsworth Common. Violent exercise is the finest thing in the world for calming mental irritation. Melton felt all the better for his ride, and returned to town at a more tranquil speed.

On his way home, he called at his club, it being about the hour when Conrad was usually there. Melton had the comfort of finding that he was en-



gaged for dinner; and though he agreed to dine with Melton the day after, still there was a respite.

* * * *

How was it with Bianca all this day ?

For a short time after Lord Melton's departure she felt happier and more tranquil than she had been for many days; she had implicit trust in Melton, and she hoped, she knew what, from his intervention. She was relieved by having found a faithful friend to whom she could confide her secret heart; the comfort of having talked over the wearing anxiety which was eating out her soul, to one who so well understood and sympathised with her, was inexpressible; and she did not reflect on the horrible pain she had inflicted on that noble and disinterested nature. Her own feelings engrossed her; and she could not help pressing heavily on the love which had flung itself under her feet, to make her way easier.

But this mood did not last long; the intense weariness, and yet ever shifting restlessness of her sick soul, hindered her from seeing any thing in the same light long together. She seemed to herself to be weltering as it were in a quicksand, where she could find nothing on which to rest her foot; she was worn out with baffled efforts to find the solution of her misery; her energies were stagnant; all manner of wild fancies, and fantastic resolves, exhaled from her dull, senseless heart, and she had no power to grasp at or grapple with them.

She had no rational expectation of seeing Conrad that day, and yet she listened to every footstep on the

stairs, to every knock at the door, till she was in a fever of excitement and expectation. She had ordered herself to be denied to all but Conrad—should he call—so there was nothing to break in on the monotony of her day. She attempted to write some letters, but after a few lines sprang up from the table in a paroxysm of impatience; she sat for a few minutes with her hands tightly strained within each other, then starting up, she walked with hurried steps to and fro the apartment; sharp groans were the only articulation for the agony of her soul, as she writhed convulsively, like a crushed worm on the couch. “I *cannot* endure this,” she cried at last, in a quivering tone; “what *have* I done, what *have* I done, that it should be laid on me?”

In a little while, the paroxysm passed—the tension of the muscles relaxed. A volume of Shakspeare (the same given her years ago by Conrad) caught her eye; on reaching it from the table, it fell, and some flowers dropped out; they were the bouquet he had flung her that night at the circus. The recollection of all he had been to her in those days, all his boyish generosity and delicacy, hardened now into manhood and worldly wisdom, came upon her; his once passionate love, old words of tenderness and endearment, all came back on her parched and burning heart; but it was like those poor shipwrecked wretches, who, dying of thirst, endeavour to assuage it with the salt-sea-water, at the cost of madness. A violent fit of convulsive weeping, which seemed as if it would tear her frame to pieces, followed, and relieved, or

rather exhausted her. She fell into a deep heavy slumber, which lasted till her attendant entered to tell her that the carriage was at the door to take her to the theatre.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?" said she, hastily starting up. "Is it not very late?"

"All in good time; but indeed, and indeed, Miss Bianca," said the woman, who had been her attendant many years, and who loved her as a child, "you look more fit to be buried than to go to the play; and then that great party afterwards, you are not fit for it, indeed; do send back word to the party at least, and say you are not well."

"I wish any body would bury me," said Bianca, "and then I could be quiet; what is that you have brought? Tea? put some salvolatile in it."

"I don't see how you are to get through your work to-night, except by a miracle; you have not eaten this blessed day, since morning; you will just kill yourself."


"Oh, you will see I shall get through very well, people do not die so easily. Here, whilst I am at the theatre, send and get this prescription made up, and have it ready when the play is over."

When Bianca reached the theatre she found it much later than she imagined; the orchestra were in their places, and she had to dress in great haste. The necessity for exertion brought back all her energy; as her dressing proceeded her spirits returned, and she was herself once more, or rather she forgot herself in her part. Her character on this evening was a very arduous one, and

never had she acted with so much energy; all the passion that was consuming her she poured into her part, and her triumph was immense; the house was nearly brought down with applause; all her private grief was for the moment swept away by the maddening excitement. An actress must in her very essence be of a quick, passionate, and above all, of a mobile temperament; the energy within her must lend itself easily to all forms and expressions; it must not remain locked up in one mode of manifestation. Bianca was emphatically born for an actress, and this stood her in stead now. The play gave a vent to all the unutterable emotions that had been tearing her heart all day; the leaden weight of deferred hope and sickening expectation was melted off, and went to give an intense and passionate meaning to her acting which, perhaps, it had never had before. When at the close of the piece she was called before the curtain, she was in great bodily exhaustion certainly; but, for the time being, not a trace remained of all the dark clouds which had overcast her soul.

Her attendant brought her some refreshment, before she prepared for the *soirée*. Lord Melton was waiting for her in the carriage,—he had been in the theatre; and if he had been in love with her in the morning, he was still more madly enamoured to-night; she seemed to him little less than divine.

An actress's triumph is certainly made visible and tangible, is brought home to her senses in a vivid manner that no other profession admits of; her influence may be short-lived, but it is an infatuation whilst it



lasts; and to feel that she is exercising "sovereign sway and masterdom" over a whole assembly, wielding their souls as she chooses, producing what emotions she will, playing upon them as upon some curious instrument, is like being possessed of a magician's power; the fruits of her successes are all paid into her hand, she, as it were, receives ready money for her genius. True, there is rarely fame for her; she leaves no trace behind of what she has been, she has her portion of goods in *this* world; but then that present moment is well filled up, and it is only in sorrow and disappointment that one clings to the future. Bianca was by no means insensible of her own power; she saw the effect she had produced on Melton, and she enjoyed it; besides, it seemed a good omen to her heart.

"I could not," said he, as they drove along, "do your bidding to-day; he was engaged—I shall see him to-morrow. Oh, Bianca! Bianca!" exclaimed he, passionately, "who can resist your will? You can subdue all men's souls to you. What hope can I have that he is insensible to you? Oh, forgive me, forgive me! You are so good, and I am so miserable; but when I see you radiant and triumphant, I feel thrown to such an infinite distance from you. I could not stay in the theatre to-night; I could not bear to see you. I was killed to think that I could make myself nothing to you, whilst you are the world to me—high as heaven. Bianca! you must be a *man* before you can know the madness of loving in vain."

"You men have so many distractions by way of com-

pensation," said Bianca;—"but see, we are arrived—are we late or early? I cannot stay above an hour, I am so weary. Will you see that the carriage comes round?"

There was an immense crush on the staircase, and it seemed a vain attempt to make their way in that direction. "Come this way," said Lord Melton, "we can get to the drawing-rooms through here; I know the house well." He crossed the hall, and lifting a *portière*, he led Bianca into a small room fitted up as a tent; two or three card tables were laid out, and the centre was filled to the roof by a stand of costly plants, which surrounded a small fountain. No one was to be seen as they entered.

"Let us rest here a little while," said Bianca, "it will not be so pleasant when we get up stairs, and if there be such a thing as a glass of water within reach, I should be thankful for it."

"Wait here, then, until I return, and I will forage for you."

"You shall find me here," replied she, seating herself; "only don't be gone long—it is not worth taking any trouble about."

A few minutes after his departure, Bianca heard the sound of voices approaching in the opposite direction. Her heart stood still, as she fancied she distinguished that of Conrad amongst them.

"I tell you, my good fellow, that Bianca has not arrived yet; I have just been through the drawing-rooms. It was a long play to-night; and when she gets here, it will be an hour before she can make her way

up stairs, so possess your soul in patience, and sit down to a game of *écarté*; there will be ample time before she appears."

"The *Satirist* says that you are about to marry her—I beg pardon, that she intends to marry you. Is that a truth, *par hasard*?"

"God forbid!" said Conrad, in an annoyed tone—"it is a report I thank none of my friends for repeating. No, I leave her to Melton; a man with a coronet, and fifteen thousand a year, may afford to marry a fancy wife,—to season the dull and decorous respectability of his position. I feel tempted to no such eccentricity; I should have spoken long since, if I had had any serious intentions."

"You might have spoken fast enough; but would she have responded, is the question," said another voice; "and what may be the fault which your fastidious excellency finds with the charming Bianca?"

"I have no idea of marrying at all at present," said Conrad, in a piqued tone; "and when I do marry, I shall choose to have a wife all to myself, and not one whose heart is case-hardened, by having stood a siege from every man about town who has chosen to address her honourably or dishonourably."

"Aye, it would be curious to calculate the number of stage kisses she had received," said another; "how many would you guess them at?"

"Come, come, that is not fair," said some one, good-naturedly, "no one ever perceived the least levity of

behaviour in her. I never heard even a whisper to her disadvantage."

"The Bianca is a very good girl," said Conrad, "but she is the last woman in the world I would marry. I would as soon take Van Amburgh's half-tamed tigress, as a grand high tragedy woman for my wife. Besides, I have a horror of all professional women. There ought to be a law to keep women from getting their own living: there are men enough in the world to work. Women ought to be taken care of, and kept in retirement; they have no qualities which fit them to struggle with the world."

"Every body knows you to be *tant soit peu* oriental in your notions," replied the voice of the young man who had first spoken, "and the fair Bianca would not be exactly a promising subject to begin with. *Pour moi*, I like a woman with a dash of the devil in her, and able to fight for herself. I would marry the Bianca to-morrow if she would have me."

"Bravo!" cried Conrad, "I will tell her so. She will be here by this time, I should think. Let us go."

The voices ceased; Bianca remained stunned, stupefied—she felt turned to stone. Shortly afterwards Lord Melton returned.

"I hope I have not quite tired out your patience," said he; "but, good God! Bianca, what has happened?" he cried, shocked at the sight of her rigid and bloodless countenance.

"Nothing, nothing," said she, in a quiet voice. "I

have only been overhearing what was not intended for me." She took a glass of water from his hand and drank the whole of it. "Now let us go up stairs."

"You are not fit for it, Bianca. Let me take you home. I can call the carriage in an instant, if you wish it."

"No, no, I tell you, I am quite able to go through my business; only, do you keep close beside me, and do not leave me."

"But, Bianca, you are ill, you are frightfully pale, there is something terrible in your looks."

"Is there?" said she, indifferently; "then the people will feel quite sure that I have taken off my rouge, and think that it does not suit me to go without—come along."

He led her across the tent-room to the door on the other side. A slight shudder passed through her when she looked at the spot where the conversation had passed a few minutes previously. A card-table was breaking up as they went by, and the people gazed curiously at her.

"That was the Bianca," said one, when they were gone. "She does not look nearly so well off the stage as I should have expected."

"Oh," replied another, "they are always so painted, one cannot tell what they are really like."

"The terrible look" Lord Melton had remarked, passed away before they reached the drawing-room, and nothing but the most ordinary and placid expression remained.

Conrad and his friends had grouped themselves in the doorway to await her coming.

With the most friendly *empressement*, Conrad advanced to her. "How *very* late you are," said he, "I began to fear you would not come. Will you let me present one of my friends to you; he is an ardent worshipper of yours, and a very good fellow beside—MR. MARCHMONT, you may present your homage."

The good-looking young man who belonged to this name, bowed to her; and Bianca recognised his voice when he spoke, as that of the young man who had deprecated the insolent remark of one of his companions. Nothing could be more captivating than the manners of Bianca; nothing exaggerated or overstrained; it was perfectly natural and well-bred; but marked with a peculiar air of kindness and conciliation. A crowd of people soon came round her, and she talked to every one, and smiled and bowed to every one to whom it was needful; but Lord Melton saw the absent look of her eyes, which her smile never illuminated. Every one seemed to do his possible, to say the best possible things. Bianca, who did not in general excel in this species of light skirmish, seemed that evening inspired, and was brilliant enough to have established a dozen reputations.

"You would hardly suppose, to look at her, that she was an actress," whispered the young man who had been presented by Conrad.

"But she *is* one, nevertheless," said Conrad.

At length the crowd began to disperse, and Bianca

rose to go ; Conrad pressed forward to offer his arm, but she had already accepted that of Lord Melton. Conrad, however, followed her to the carriage, and seemed extremely anxious about the adjustment of her shawl, expressing great solicitude about her exposure to the night air. This last incident, was the crowning drop in poor Bianca's cup that night; but she wished him good night in a steady voice, and then fell back fainting in her carriage.

CHAPTER II.

EARLY the next morning, Lord Melton received the following note from Bianca. It was scarcely legible:

“ DEAR KIND FRIEND,

“ I am better this morning, but dreadfully weak. I cannot see even you, for I must get myself up for to-night; it is a new play, and there is no help for it. Take no more trouble about what I requested yesterday. I know all I need to know.

“ What a blessing it is we cannot be defrauded out of death; that is a rest that will not fail us. God bless you.

“ BIANCA.”

Lord Melton guessed every thing, and was ashamed of himself to find that his secret feeling was a flash of gladness; he did all he could to suppress it; but there it was in spite of him, for he felt convinced that the real live Conrad was not his rival; that he was only a phantom dressed by Bianca's imagination, which must fade “into the light of common day,” and he loved Bianca deeply enough to have patience; he could have waited seven years, like Jacob, and found

them as seven days now that for the first time he had a hope for himself. He forgot, meanwhile, how poor Bianca was suffering; but our own personality sits closer to us than any other feeling; no generosity can enable us to get rid of it; our "self-negation" is at best but a generous fiction, by means of which we try to love some neighbour better than ourselves; but it will not do; when that neighbour comes into collision with our self, our feelings take part with our self directly; we can love those who combine with us, and enhance our self by reflection, but we cannot feel any genuine complacency for those who cross it. Lord Melton felt in a much better temper with Bianca than he had done the day before.

The day passed dreamily away; he did nothing, and was surprised to find it dinner-time so soon. Every thing stood precisely as it did on the previous day, and yet every thing was changed for him. At the same hour the day before he had nearly killed his horse by galloping it, in a frenzy of love, spite, and desperation; now, he felt quite up to being glad to see the very man he had wanted to shoot yesterday! Really we are all fine creatures, to be immortal! we ought to be shut up in glass tubes to show the variations of the atmosphere, and so turn our fantastic nature to some purpose!

Dinner passed without much conversation; it is too good a thing to be talked over, and is, besides, a trifling with one's digestion,—the greatest blessing under heaven!

They were alone after dinner; Conrad luxuriously thrown back in a large chair, had lighted a cigar, and,

half-closing his eyes, was watching the curling smoke in a state of dreamy beatitude. Melton was smoking too, but pacing restlessly up and down the room.

"Melton !" cried Conrad, disturbed by his companion's movements, "you are as bad as a wild beast in a cage; and even a tiger is too much of a Christian not to lie still after his dinner. What *are* you in such a peripatetic reverie about? Did you quarrel with the fair Bianca last night?"

"Why do you suppose that?" asked Melton, coldly.

"Come, come; every body can see that you are her favoured cavalier, and are the only one who gets a chance of even quarrelling with her, for she plays the discreet princess to a miracle."

"I have a great respect for Bianca," rejoined Melton, "and I do not like—in short, it has always seemed to me a hard case, that professional women should be liable to be pressed as subjects for all manner of idle discourse and speculation."

"Is she not a free topic—is she not a public character? If we may not speak of an actress, Heaven have mercy on our tongues! What *may* we speak about?" said Conrad, in unfeigned astonishment. "But I can quite understand your feeling—that is the worst of having a public character for a Dulcinea, there's no having her all to oneself; the *éclat* that surrounds her is piquant to one's vanity, it is urged on by glare and gas-light, the flourish of drums and trumpets, and the acclamations of the select members of the pit and gallery; and when one penetrates to the goddess,

one finds the atmosphere round her in a fog with the sighs of a hundred hopeless passions. The broad fact of her virtue may be firm as adamant, but, for my own part, I would prefer a woman who has been less tried !”

“Do you speak from your heart?” said Lord Melton.

“Certainly,” replied Conrad; “and now do sit down, for I want to talk to you since we are on the subject. I have the highest respect for the Bianca, whom I have known ever since she was a child. She was my protégée; and, as a young man, I was passionately in love with her. It was a mad adoration; I should have ruined myself for her,—if she would have let me,—have braved my father’s anger, and married her outright; but she was very generous, as the phrase is; or, rather, she had common sense, for she refused me, confessing, at the same time, that she loved me; and, I believe in my heart, she did. She was full of dreams of distinction in her profession, and promised, if ever she entered on her heritage of glory, to bestow it on me. We parted, I to go abroad, while she remained to drudge at home. But she is one of those obstinate constant ones, who cannot be estranged by absence. We used to write very moving letters to each other for a long while. But though a woman’s love may subsist on letters, a man needs more substantial diet; and, besides, she was too vehement; there was no keeping up with her. A salamander would have been scorched by her letters. Her sun put my fire out; a phenomenon, true in morals as in physics. Travelling about from country to country does not tend to make a man con-

stant. In short, my passion for the fair Bianca died a natural death. I still retained a sincere friendship for her, but that is not much. When she appeared in London I was not in the house ; but she made a hit, and I went the next night ; and really it was superb ! and exceeded every thing I expected. It did not make me in love, but in vanity with her ; and, by Heaven ! I was dreadfully embarrassed to find her so constant. However, I renewed my homage to her. But a passion once extinguished '*ne renait jamais dans la même place ni pour la même personne,*' as I need not tell you ; and we have had nothing but squabbles, and I am tired to death. When I came here to-day, I determined, if I had an opportunity, to open my mind to you. The truth is, I want to get out of it ; for, at present, I am neither one thing nor another with her."

Lord Melton was struck dumb at this unexpected and undesired confidence. His first impulse was to laugh at his own whimsical position ; but he was obliged to say something, so he asked—"Do you then dislike Bianca?"

"Far from it," cried Conrad, "I have a real respect for her, and would serve her in any way I could ; but I cannot be in love with her. I like being in her company, I like talking to her, *mais cela suffit*. Of late years I have got a real horror of professional women. I never would marry an *artiste* of any grade. A woman who makes her mind public, or exhibits herself in any way, no matter how it may be dignified by the title of art, seems to me little better than a woman

of a nameless class. I am more jealous of the mind than of the body; and, to me, there is something revolting in the notion of a woman who professes to love and belong to you alone, going and printing the secrets of her inmost heart, the most sacred workings of her soul, for the benefit of all who can pay for them. What is the value of a woman whom every one who chooses may know as much about as you do yourself? The stage is still worse, for that is publishing both mind and body too. Every body may go to the theatre to see an actress, and may pass whatever gross comments on her they will; she has no protection, is open to every species of proposal, and that is not precisely the line of life from which one would choose one's wife. You know I am not straight-laced, but in the matter of matrimony one's respectability is at stake; it is the ground in which one hopes to take root and flourish, and the profession of an actress or an authoress is not the most promising for one's credit; besides they have been too much accustomed to admiration to be able to do without it, or to be satisfied with the mere approbation of a husband. Since I got entangled again with Bianca, I have been thinking a great deal on this subject, and feel very strongly."

"Then do you mean to asperse Bianca's character?" asked Lord Melton, fiercely.

"By no means," rejoined Conrad, "I am speaking of professional women. It is Bianca's misfortune that she is one. I dare say half the men about town could testify to her perfect virtue, respectability, and

insensibility, and all that ; but I am not in love with her, and therefore my theory and practice are for once in wonderful harmony."

Lord Melton had hardly been able to contain his rage during this ineffable harangue. "Why then," he said, bitterly, "do you join the chorus of applause that greets her every night, if you despise her for her profession?"

"Pardon me," replied Conrad, shrugging his shoulders; "what should we do with theatres and actresses?—we were speaking of matrimony, and I told you my opinion. I would use all my influence to support Bianca; I would stand by her through any attack that might be made on her; I would be her staunch partisan (as I always have been); I would be her steady friend; but that has nothing to do with loving and marrying. I could not love a professional woman, and I would cut my right hand off sooner than marry one; they are all very well in their way, but no wife or daughter of mine should ever, with my consent, form an acquaintance with actress, artist, singer, or musician."

"Would you then make them Pariahs?"

"No, other people may not be so particular, and the world is wide enough for them; besides, what do women of that sort care for quiet domestic life, such as we all dream of when we marry, no matter what Don Giovannis we may have been in our bachelor days. It is all very fine talking about liberality and all that, but a professional life ruins a woman as a woman. They all of them follow their profession, not from any high love of art, but to gain their living, and that takes the

shine out of any ideal or poetry that might invest their art; they do not believe what they profess to set forth, they do it for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and get out of it as soon as they can. Then, consider the fierce passions that are aroused, the envy, the jealousy, the stimulated vanity, the self-love, susceptible almost to insanity; and for what purpose do they pay this fearful price? —To amuse a few hundred lazy people for a couple of hours, who go to see them, not to have any great or high thoughts stirred within them, for one-half of them don't even understand the good things that are said; but to have their *ennui* gently stimulated, or because they don't know what else to do with their evening; and the life and soul of a woman is to be melted down to minister to the caprices of a parcel of people who have a contempt in their heart for the very thing they go and applaud. Can such a mode of life be any thing but a degradation to the women engaged in it?"

"Because the mass of people in the world are stupid, and blind, and coarse, I do not see how that degrades the individuals who make it their business to endeavour to refine and cultivate them," said Lord Melton.

"First-rate people are, and always will be, first-rate," said Conrad, "no matter what their profession; but as regards the stage, of which we are more particularly speaking, the gain is not worth the expenditure of body and soul it requires; people are not to be taught virtue in earnest by seeing virtue in play; they go to be amused, and don't thank you to be any thing else; and I have too strong a feeling about women to desire to see

them sacrificed to any such hopeless notions. Men may stand it better, but what is it that professional life does for women? Take Bianca, if you will, as a specimen, she is one of the best, and what has been its effect? it has unsexed her, made her neither a man nor a woman. A public life must deteriorate women; they are thrown on the naked world, to have to deal, like us men, with all its bad realities; they lose all the beautiful ideal of their nature, all that is gentle, helpless, and confiding; they are obliged of necessity to keep a keen eye to their own interest, and, having no inherent force or strength, they are reduced to cunning; their intercourse with others becomes a matter of interest and calculation; they may, and many of them no doubt do, keep virtuous in the broad sense of the term; but, in their dealings with men, they use their sex as a weapon; they play with the passions of men to some degree like courtesans; they use the charms of their persons to carry their purposes; they may have no intention to realise illicit hopes, but whilst a man is not quite hopeless, he will exert himself with a zeal, which, if he were quite sure nothing was intended, would be circumscribed by a very wooden horizon. The soft plastic virtues which are the charm of a woman, are all lost—and how can it be otherwise? Look what a professional career is. It is a life that turns men into tigers—a state of war and fierce struggle; a man must be ready to tread down every obstacle, even if that obstacle were his best friend; he must know no friends, nothing but patrons or rivals;—every nerve strained to the full to work his way for-

wards to fame and distinction, unless he have, along with that, a fierce and fiery will, an indomitable perseverance, and a stern energy that, as it were, makes him nerved with iron and sinewed with brass, he will be trodden under foot;—it is a state of war without bloodshed ; and what ought women to have in common with such a career as that? They have not physical strength for a hand to hand fight; they are incapable of any concentration of energy, or drudgery of hard work; the best results they produce are graceful failures; their beauty lies in falling short, rather than achieving. A woman's work cannot be judged on the basis of its real merit, like that of men ; consequently, it never is ; there is always a gallant fiction which guides the judgment. All that a professional woman achieves, then, at such a grievous cost of all that is charming in her nature, is only to do what a man would have done much better. The intrinsic value of a woman's work out of her own sphere is nothing, and what are the qualities developed to make up for it? She has got to a knowledge of evil, for she has had to fight against it—to put it aside (if indeed she *have* put it aside); the bloom and charm of her innocence is gone; she has gained a dogmatic, harsh, self-sufficing vanity, which she calls principle; she strides and stalks through life, neither one thing nor another; she has neither the softness of a woman, nor the firm, well-proportioned principle of a man; from her contact with actual things, she is slightly masculine in her views, but the *woman* spoils their completeness; she cannot attain, at least

she does not attain, to manly prudence and grasp of intellect. She is a bat in the human species; when she loves, she loves like a man, and yet expects to be adored as a woman—the good gods deliver us from all such.”

“And this,” said Melton, sarcastically, when Conrad paused, out of breath, “is the inner side of the flattery with which you deify the successful artistes who minister to your pleasures; this is your secret opinion of the women, who, like so many roses, are crushed and exhaled, to produce scarcely one drop of perfume! It is lucky none of them hear you, or we should have the rest of the season turned into a desert. The nymphs of the ballet would be strangling themselves in their garlands; and as to her Majesty’s female servants, the singers and actresses, they would be throwing up their engagements at a minute’s warning, and Lord Byron’s ‘Curse of Darkness’ would fall on all pleasant things! Try this fresh claret, and tell me, in sober earnest, what women ought to be, and to do, to meet your notions of female perfection. What is the birthright of excellence they lose in making use of the talents Providence may have given them?”

“The sort of woman I dream of for my wife, is, in all respects, the reverse of Bianca,” said Conrad, gravely. “A rational, though inferior intelligence, to understand me and help me in my pursuits; clinging to me for help, looking to me for guidance; a gentle, graceful timidity keeping down all display of her talents, a sense of propriety keeping her from all eccentric ori-

ginality, either of thought or deed, her purity and delicacy of mind keeping her from all evil, rather as a matter of exquisite taste, than from any idea of the coarse realities of things, right and wrong. She would shrink from evil instinctively; and it is your pleasure to keep her fragile, graceful nature from being too rudely tried;—you *know* she has no strength, therefore you preserve her carefully from all danger. There is something inexpressibly touching in a true woman's helplessness, her graceful prejudices, and aversion to every thing that is too *prononcée*; she is the softened reflex of her husband's opinions—she does nothing too well. For the woman, whom alone I could love, would be too delicate to desire to attract admiration by her accomplishments; she would be religious, because she could not help it, but she would be alike removed from philosophic doubt or enthusiastic bigotry. A woman ought to have too much taste to be either a sceptic or a saint. Quietly at anchor by her own fire-side, gentle, low-voiced, loving, confiding—such is MY ideal of a woman and a wife; and certainly a professional woman would not be likely to realise it.”

“Bravo,” cried Melton, “you paint well, upon my honour. I must take a glass of wine to recover from such a vision of exquisite helplessness. Your taste seems a mixture of Oriental notions and European customs. I agree with you, however, that wise guidance is precisely the one thing needed by women, and precisely the thing they seldomest obtain. Women fall very un-luckily into the world: they have all sorts of precious

qualities and capabilities lying within them, which they know not how to use aright, and it is their misfortune that in dealing with them, *secondary* motives are alone appealed to. Women are put under plenty of conventional restraint, there is plenty of punishment in store if they go astray, but no broad principle is ever given on which they may take their stand; arbitrary enactments, no matter how surrounded by a *chevaux-de-frise* of social excommunication, unless they recommend themselves to the heart and conscience as *in themselves* right and true, will fall down like houses of cards at the first breath of a strong temptation. Women from their birth are kept from that knowledge which contact with the actual things of life alone can give; they are placed in a state of pupillage; and how, I ask you, do men fulfil the task they have arrogated to themselves of laying down the law for women? All women feel their weakness, and wise guidance and government is what they all yearn after. I question whether a woman ever took a lover without a hope to find in him the one who would guide her and lead her into all that it was right and desirable she should become—the one being on whom she might implicitly rely. And what is it that they find, with their incomplete maturity, their undeveloped capabilities, their crude imaginings, vehement feelings, and blind aspirations after something better and stronger than themselves? Poor broken, fluttering things that they are! with indications of whatever is pure, lovely, and of good report, yet without the strength or knowledge to educe meaning and order from all the precious things

crushed together and fermenting within them, they *do* need guidance—they call for it earnestly and passionately, and what *is* the guidance they find?—an appeal to their sense of *gracefulness*!—the standard of right and wrong offered to them is the approbation of us men; all their virtues and qualities are degraded into *charms*; no higher motive is ever suggested to them than that of being agreeable to us; they are to be flavoured with virtues and tintured with accomplishments, just up to the point to meet the taste of the day, but never with the intent to strengthen their own hearts and souls. A woman is a rational being, with reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting, and yet she is never educated for her own sake, to enable her to lead her own life better; her qualities and talents are not considered sacred personalities, but are modified, like the feet of Chinese women, to meet an arbitrary taste. What is the most stringent caution ever offered to young women to lead their life by? It is, ‘Do not do so and so, do not say so and so, before MEN, they do not admire it.’ When it was the question about giving women education—‘Men do not like learning in women,’ was the grand argument used. Men are allowed to examine into their religious opinions, to be philosophers, to be sceptics, to be no religion at all, if they please; but has it not been said a million times, ‘No man would permit his *wife* to be an infidel,’—not because it is a bad thing for her, personally, but because ‘religion in a woman looks so lovely.’ And yet a woman has a soul of her own to be saved; but she is

never appealed to on *that* ground;—she is exhorted to be modest, ‘because modesty is her great charm,’—and as to female virtue, that is legislated for on the score of its social convenience; and though there is no end to the fine things that have been said in compliment to it, yet they all resolve themselves into that. Then their gentleness and softness are ‘so lovely,’ and are preached up in all the books written with the purport of teaching the women of England their duty—and no other motive is ever given. It no doubt is highly desirable that women should be all these things; but what I complain of is, the all-pervading sensualism which runs through the education and legislation men have provided for women. If women were machines, were in very deed our property, then, indeed, all this might answer; but they are *not*, and there is no possibility of educating them up to the point of being conveniently fascinating, and then stopping short;—they have higher qualities existing in them, and unless those qualities are appealed to, you cannot hold them, or influence them; they are *living souls*, and you cannot dogmatise to a *life*, nor cut it out according to pattern.”

“Well, but my dear fellow,” interrupted Conrad, “the women who follow their own devices, and insist on being strong-minded women, are deucedly disagreeable; and they always end by making fools of themselves.”

“Those women who have strong qualities, decided tastes, aspirations after higher and better modes of life, possessing genius, in short, have no vent for their energy;

the vitality that is in them has no adequate mode of manifestation, unless they have a definite profession. If they are in private life, all their energy is flung back upon them; it becomes overlaid with *ennui*, and they sink into apparent indolence and quietness, but a diseased action goes on within—they are restless, discontented, having so much more energy than they can employ; greedy after excitement, no matter of what kind, their talents and their life are fretted away together. In private life, their soul's energy has no outlet but love—love, or religion—and *that* never comes till afterwards; so they throw themselves headlong into a *grande passion*, and go to the devil, if the devil stands in their way. It is a fearful responsibility to have to deal with such women; and your rules of taste are hardly likely to prove rules of life to such fiery natures, in such emergencies. They require a *living principle*, by which they may guide themselves aright. For, depend upon it, to such as these, it is a very small matter to be judged by men's judgment. They have an instinct for right and truth, and nothing but being taught and guided to perceive aright that which '*really is*,' can control their passionate wayward nature. Rules and decorums, and the 'three thousand punctualities,' fall from them like 'green withes.' A man is never embarrassed by any qualities he may possess; he has always a legitimate channel for their employment."

"And so have women," cried Conrad; "there is always plenty for them to do. Let them find out some man wiser and better than themselves, and make them-

selves into a beautiful reflex of his best qualities. It would be far better, and more becoming, in a woman, to do this, than to set up, on her own basis, as a superior, independent being. Let her be agreeable and good tempered, and make his life happier. What can she desire better? It is no good, my dear fellow, your going on in this way about the rights of women ; in the long run, people always get as much as they deserve ; and if women are so ill-treated, as you say they are, it is just because they do not induce any thing better ; any way, they were never intended to go blazing about with distracted reputations, as authoresses, actresses, and what not. No good ever came of it yet ; they are neither happier, nor more respected for it. If they admired a higher order of character, in men, I suppose men would have to improve themselves to meet the demand accordingly. So what is the good of talking, and wanting to make women disagreeable ?”

“It puts me out of all patience,” cried Melton, “to hear of nothing but the ‘becoming,’ and the ‘agreeable,’ there are qualities, even in women, of infinitely more importance. To be ‘agreeable,’ is *not* before all things necessary, even in a woman : they never were intended to lead a purely *relative* life ; and, until they cease to be educated with a sole view to what men admire, they will never be any better than they are. We require virtue, and strength, and truth, and reality, from women ; grace and agreeableness are secondary qualities. I can tolerate a woman with real genius and qualifications for it, following a profession, because,

to a degree, it gives her a personal and independent existence. The objections you raise are accidental, not essential; and I believe in the possibility of finding women who pursue art, for the love of art, and not for the glorification of themselves. What, however, can be worse than the present order of things? As things now stand, in what does the delectable state of 'refinement, helpless confiding-delicacy' and all the trash in which women are educated *end*? If a woman has not a family, or a profession, to occupy her time, she either takes to drinking, or intriguing, or to playing the deuce in some way, and all to deaden and distract the *ennui* that eats into her vitality, —vitality which she has never been taught, adequately, to employ; and to which, in the end, Acteon-like, she falls a prey. Your ideal of a woman would not stand the wear and tear of real life. Weakness is *not* grace, for that requires well-controlled strength. Women have an inner life as real as that of man, as full of struggles and griefs; if they are to be kept from evil, they must have as strong a law of right and wrong to control them; they must not have their moral sense palled and tampered with by *conserves* of morality, or a gospel according to *gracefulness*; there is only ONE law of what is really right, for men or for women, and no second motive, no sense of decorum, will stand either man or woman in stead in the hour of trial. A sense of propriety cannot swallow up temptation. I am not a stickler for the 'rights of women,' if by those you mean becoming a soldier, or a lawyer, or a member of Parliament. The rights they really do want, though

they cannot so well articulate them, is to have a sense of right or wrong inculcated for its own sake, and not to have the life choked out of them by having the decorums and 'the becoming' eternally substituted for it—not to have their lives and souls frittered into a shape to meet the notion of a 'truly feminine character,' but to be allowed to grow up freely, and to have their natural characters developed as God made them. But come, let us go and refresh ourselves by seeing Bianca. We shall be in time for the last two acts. She is a noble creature, if ever there was one!"

"With all my heart," said Conrad; "only, if you had intended to go and see her, you might have followed the considerate example of the old country parson, who shortened his sermon, because, as he told his parishioners, there was to be a bull-bait in the afternoon, and he thought they might like to go!"

CHAPTER III.

THE next morning Lord Melton went to see Bianca. He found her just returned from rehearsal, lying pale and exhausted on the sofa. He was pained to the soul by the haggard, wretched expression of her face. She looked older by several years than the last time he saw her. She half rose as he approached, and said,

"You are the only person I wanted to see. Sit down and talk to me; I am wretchedly tired; indeed I am always weary now; but we have just had a three hours' rehearsal, so there is some excuse this time. Were you in the theatre last night? I did not see you."

"I went late; Conrad was dining with me, and we got into rather a warm discussion. The curtain was just up for the fourth act when we arrived. In that last scene with your children you were very grand; it was like being struck with lightning. I can give you no idea of the sensation you produced on me—you touched a chord that had never been stirred within me before. What a mother you would make!"

"Ah!" said Bianca, smiling, "depend upon it, a

woman has only half her soul developed until she is a mother. No matter how clever or full of genius she may be, there are within her depths of passionate tenderness, strength, and devotedness; instincts, wisdom, which can only be unsealed in her for her children. I felt *that*, last night. I could only imagine what it would be; but I felt there was a secret I could not fathom—a depth of holy mystery into which I could not descend. I have had parts with scenes about children in them before, but I never felt so passionately affected as I was last night.”

“I could not look round,” said Lord Melton, “but from the dead silence, I should fancy all the house was as much affected as I was myself. Do you like the play as a whole? The papers speak well of it.”

“My own part in it is very strong, and the situations are very effective, but the dialogue is not equal to it; and besides, it was written expressly for me, and that is reversing the order of things. The actor should be made for the play, not the play for the actor, for it then always has more or less the air of being made to a pattern; and when the author has his eye always on the peculiar capabilities of the actor for whom it is designed, he does not and cannot go freely and fearlessly abroad into the wide region of human nature—he never gets off the stage. His work has always an air of the special and temporary, not of the broad, eternal, though ever moving, depths of humanity; the emotions and passions are all more or less stage properties, as much as the dresses and decorations; and therefore I prefer plays

which have been written without any special reference to my capabilities."

"What is the sort of character you like acting the best?"

"I never played Queen Katherine in 'Henry the Eighth,' and I have a fancy I could do it well; and if I were a *man*, I should enjoy playing 'Hamlet.' Oh, you do not know, you cannot imagine, the bitterness of heart, the intense envy I have felt in former years, when a grand play has been put on, and I have felt no hope, no prospect, of getting beyond my own little part of two dozen lines! Oh, the maddening mortifications I have had to devour! I used to beg to have some of the copying of the theatre, it eked out my salary; and you may fancy what it was to have to write out words that burned my heart, and feel all I had it in me to do with them if they had been cast for me. I used to think I should be at the summit of my desires if I might attain the privilege of choosing my own characters. Alas, and alas!"

"Well," said Lord Melton, "there is no doubt that it is a privilege, and one that you must rejoice in having gained; power and position are valuable to those who can use them, but they are means not ends; and you are worthy to possess them, for you use them to noble aims and not to your own aggrandisement and glorification."

"Ah," replied Bianca, bitterly, "*power* is not what a woman asks—it does not lessen her sufferings, or make her happier."

“ Would you desire to be without sorrow or sufferings,” said Lord Melton, gently; “ and is making yourself happy precisely the highest thing to be aimed at? ‘ Happiness’ as ‘ our being’s end and aim,’ has always seemed to me a most ‘ lame and impotent conclusion’ for such a noble and mysterious drama as the life of even the most insignificant of God’s creatures. As much of it as falls out for us incidentally, we are of course glad to possess; but to make it a distinct and recognised aim, to convert our life’s pilgrimage into ‘ a search after happiness,’ seems to me drivelling—to the last point of paralytic imbecility. What is *life* in its very essence but the *power to struggle*? All the happiness I can conceive a noble rational creature aspiring after, is the privilege of not being taken at a disadvantage; of having the free use of all his faculties: not to be confined or cramped in his efforts, not be weltering and struggling like a strong swimmer in an eddying current, nor embarrassed by being divided against himself, but free to wrestle erect and manful against all the difficulties that beset him. I do not, my dear friend, believe in any state of happiness in which we may sit down quiescent, till we go off into a state of coma; that would be a life-in-death, thickening our souls and stupifying our hearts, till there would remain hardly a step between us and death, as far as any spiritual manifestation went. No, no: believe me, that to possess our souls entire, not to get them warped or crippled by any dispensation that befalls; to be able to solve the problem of whatever pain or sorrow we may be called on to endure, and so bring

light out of darkness, strength out of weakness; is all that a noble or heroic soul would feel disposed to pray for. To be able to take patiently not only the external accidents and casualties of life, but even the still harder-to-be-endured consequences of our own actions, brings far more real comfort, more tranquillity of soul, than all the panting aspirations after some undefined conjunction of things under which we expect to live in perfect felicity to the 'end of a long life,' as nursery fairy tales say."

"Ay, ay," replied Bianca, mournfully, "what you say is heroic and manly, and capable of strengthening the soul of those already at ease; but when we are suffering, when more seems laid upon us than we are able to bear, when our very lips are white with the agony within us,—at such a time, we can only feel the quivering of our nature, we can only hear the groans that articulate it. However, we need not endure for ever, that is one comfort."

"My dear, dear friend," replied Melton, "I must not have you weak. You must not be faithless to yourself; you are too richly freighted with precious gifts, recklessly to make shipwreck. You are not your own; you have a task to do in this world, and if you neglect it, you will not be guiltless. I am not ignorant of the heavy blow that has fallen on you; but a merely personal grief is no excuse for your abandoning the post in which you are placed,—for neglecting the work to which you are sent."

"You speak to me, as if I were a *man*," said Bianca,

bitterly : “ what use has a woman for all her gifts, what object has she in all her work, but to centre them in some strong and loving heart ; and if she finds not *that*, she has neither gifts nor wisdom. If my ‘ gifts,’ as you call them, do not seem precious in the sight of him for whose sake I have toiled and aspired,—and in some degree achieved,—of what further use are they to *me* ? They have failed me in my need, and are worthless. They have not only failed to win me the love of the only human being from whom I ever cared to win it, but they have actually hindered me, have been the real obstacles which have turned him away from me ; and now I hate them, I despise them,—and, like faithless servants, cast them behind me. Do not speak to me of them,—what have they brought but wretchedness and humiliation, masked in success and adulation ! You see me here before you, a scorned and rejected woman, knowing myself to be so. I heard from his own lips that he despises me, for the very faculties which have been consecrated to him in my inmost soul ; and do you think that, after such a revelation, all the shoutings, and applaudings, and bouquets, which greet me nightly, will not sound in my ears like the acclamations of a mob at the sight of a man in the pillory,—or the execution of a felon, if you will. No doubt we are all equally considered by them—a spectacle, and nothing more ? ”

“ You are speaking bitterly, Bianca ; and what is more, you do not in your heart *believe* what you are saying. As an utterance of pain and impatience, it may

pass, but it must not be recorded as the deliberate expression of your belief. The opinion of a hundred Conrads, the selfish sensualism which would degrade the race of women down to a mere standard of taste,—considering them, and their gifts and virtues, of value only in so far as they are pleasant and graceful in his eyes, and the eyes of men generally,—cannot make that true which is essentially false. Gifts like yours were bestowed for something better than to make the possessor desirable in the eyes of any individual, no matter how exalted, or fascinating, or excellent he may be. Conrad does not happen to admire women of a marked character, or of distinguished talent; but that does not make them worthless, nor does it alter the fact that you are a woman of genius, of strong energetic character, devoted to an art which has never yet been developed in its highest and noblest capabilities, but has always had the misfortune to be looked upon rather as a vehicle for the manifestation of personal capabilities, and for the acquirement of personal credit, than pursued as ART, containing an Idea and significance far beyond the casual success or talent of its votaries, which are very secondary. That they devote themselves honestly, and with a single-minded purpose, to make manifest, as far as in them lies, the soul, the *Idea* that lies hidden in their art,—to be articulated in the laws and forms of their profession,—and, making it visible to the eyes of men, make it also honourable;—this I conceive to be the true end for which men are endowed. I conceive further, that every man who has received a

special power to work in any mode of art (no matter what), has a responsibility not to be evaded,—and he is bound to persevere and work on, through good success and bad success, through evil report and good report, and can be released by nothing but death. If he be a true artist, one whose soul is really filled with living fire from the altar of the Eternal,—if he be a true spirit, and not an earth-vapour,—he *will* go on, *will* endure to the end; and no matter how faint and weary he may feel, ready even to lie down and die by the way,—still he will not desist, he will not lose his faith: he will find strength at his utmost need, and he will go on, struggling to give form and utterance to the Divine idea that lies in the ART of which he is the priest, grappling with the undefined and mysterious, yet all-pervading, spirit, and compelling it to make itself visible to those who have no skill to seize on it for themselves. But this can only be achieved by those who are pure in heart,—free from double motives or selfish desires for their own credit, and with whom it is the *Work* that is ever present, and not the *Reward*. They who have this high calling dare not stay their hand on account of any insult to themselves: they are marked for a higher service, and to them it is a small matter to be judged of men's judgment,—they are bound to magnify their Work, and make it honourable. The motive that has been influencing you, dear friend, although beautiful and devoted in its aspect, has still been all too low, too entirely personal to be worthy

of you. It is now taken away from you; it may be that this is to teach you to go on in a higher and nobler spirit—to endure, as seeing that which is invisible. It has been necessary that you should suffer this also, and I feel convinced that you will not fail.”

Bianca had buried her face in the sofa pillow during this speech, and did not immediately reply. At length she said in a broken voice,

“One’s own misery sticks so close to one, it is all *within*; whilst what you say, though strong and true, seems to lie abroad on the outside. Your words ought to give me strength, but they do not touch me; I feel so weak and wretched, that I can believe in nothing else. No, no, you must give me time—it is from time alone, and not from any efforts of my own, that I hope to live down this sorrow. The strong hours will conquer it.”

“I am content to have you say this,” replied Lord Melton. “I hope all things for you. Do you think that I am on a bed of roses all this time? Oh, Bianca! would that I might bear your sorrow for you. It is horrible for me to see you suffer thus!”

“You must forgive me that too,” said Bianca, smiling sadly, and passing her hand down his face. “Misery makes us press very heavily on those who approach us to support our fainting steps. I do not deserve your friendship, but you do me good. What should I be at this instant without you? But now you must go away, for I dare not talk any more. Shall you look in at the theatre to-night?”

"I will try to do so, if only for half an hour; but I am not sure that I can."

"Remember," said she, holding his hand, "that I shall be acting for you. You must not quarrel with me for any motive that will carry me through, and I would do much for the sake of pleasing you. Now, farewell."

CHAPTER IV.

BIANCA was not long in deciding on the line of conduct she should adopt towards Conrad, nor in following it out when she had once made up her mind. After Lord Melton had quitted the room, she lay still for a few minutes, and then, with a composure that surprised herself, she went to her writing-table which stood in the window, wrote a rapid note, directed, sealed it, and despatched it to the post with a sort of cheerful alacrity; and when it was gone, felt really released, at least that she stood no longer in a false position. She went to the theatre at night in a feverish excitement of spirits, which she fancied a resolute composure; acted extremely well, and thought she had risen superior to her weakness; but when called before the curtain, she recognised Conrad in the stage-box, and all her equanimity was gone. Indignation, bitter scorn of herself, helpless, passionate love, swept like a tempest through her soul, leaving her a struggling wreck. She went home almost mad; but with a wild hope lurk-

ing in her heart, that Conrad, touched by her note, had been unable to break with her, and had come there to let her understand that he would not forego his claim, nor accept his freedom. She imagined she should find him waiting for her at home, to tell her how she had misjudged him, and how little he desired to be set free. "Any one here?" she inquired, hurriedly, as she sprang from the carriage.

"No, madam," was the reply.

"Any letter come?"

"Nothing at all, madam, since you went out—except Lord Melton's man with some grapes and flowers; but no letter or note of any sort."

Bianca's heart sank dead within her, and she flung herself on the sofa in a fit of passionate weeping. Then she began to hope for the morrow. Conrad had not been home—had not received her note—she should hear from him on the morrow. The certainty that some explanation, some words of frankness and affection, must be wrung from him by what she had written, almost comforted her, and prevented her feeling the desolate hopelessness of her position.

On Conrad's return home from two balls and a *soirée*, at which he made his appearance after the theatre, he perceived Bianca's note on the table amongst a heap of others letters. He opened it the last, with a feeling of annoyance and dread; he expected a reproach for his absence and neglect. He found the following words.

“DEAR CONRAD,

“I overheard a conversation not intended for me on Thursday evening, in the tent-room at Mrs. Bingham’s party. Why have you not been more frank with me? Why leave me to ascertain your feelings by a mere accident? It was not well of you to do so, and I deserved better at your hands. You have suffered much needless annoyance; had I known that you felt me an entanglement, disavowed by your feelings, and disowned by your judgment, you might have been free long since. However, it remains for me to set you at liberty now from any claim I may have upon you on the score of our engagement, and you are honourably free henceforth. But the generosity and kindness with which you have befriended me can never be effaced,—they lie in the safe keeping of the past, and can suffer no change. If I have wearied you with my affection, forgive me; it was all the return I could make. God forbid I should be a clog or a weariness to you.

“In conclusion, I have one favour to beg at your hands. As I am obliged to continue on the spot till the termination of my engagement, will you refrain from attempting to see me, or from throwing yourself in my way. Believe me, it is from no anger or resentment that I ask this, but that I may be able to keep the composure necessary to my work. No bitterness or unkindness lurks in this request. God bless you, Conrad, for ever and ever.

“BIANCA.”

Conrad was not nearly so delighted as might have been expected, at reading this note. He had been taken at his word unawares, and we hardly any of us recognise our wishes when we see them suddenly realised. However, he was a man of the world, and knew that his present fit of relenting would pass away, and that the release offered to him must be accepted now, or never, as there would be no getting out of a renewal. The next morning, as Bianca was at breakfast, she received a note, the handwriting of which made her heart stand still.

"Any one waiting?" she inquired.

"No, ma'am; Mr. Conrad Percy's servant brought it, and said there was no answer."

She allowed the note to lie several minutes before she had courage to open it. When she did so, the whole paper swam before her eyes, and it was some time before she could decypher a word; at length she read as follows:

"Bianca! you desire me not to seek you, and, therefore, I do violence to the impulse which prompts me to come to you. God knows the pang your note has given me. You are dearer to me than you believe, than I believed myself. With my whole soul I respect and admire you; and even those casual words you overheard must have told you the consideration in which I held you personally, the bitterness of them was for your profession. But whenever or wherever you might have heard me speak of you—the high respect and regard in which I

have always held you, would have been always marked—do me that justice at least.

“I have shrunk from an explanation with you in a way that was cowardly, and that I do not justify; but pardon me if I say that it was the ungoverned passionate-ness of your nature which made me shrink from a scene likely to prove equally painful to you and to myself. If you are suffering at this moment, believe me, Bianca, you are not suffering alone; my very soul is torn by the severance of the ties that have bound us, but I believe it is wiser to accept a present suffering than to entail a future and more lasting one upon ourselves. We are not suited for each other. I look to the end; and this alone enables me to resist coming to throw myself at your feet, and entreating you to forget all that has disturbed us. You are quite right, and show your usual firmness in desiring that for the present we should not meet, and therefore I feel that I am fulfilling your wishes when I depart for Paris to-night; afterwards, I shall perhaps proceed to the south of France and Spain, and at all events shall not return to England for some months. Now, Bianca, farewell. Dear—very dear—will you and your welfare ever be to me. Do not fancy this letter harsh or unfeeling; my tears drop on the paper while I sign this—

“CONRAD.”

Whilst reading the letter, Bianca was at times in doubt whether Conrad really intended to give her up after all, but the conclusion banished all hope, and she sat like one turned to stone; not thinking, not feeling,

but utterly stupified. After awhile, she became conscious of a sense of freedom and certainty, an absence of the gnawing restlessness—the weary alternations of hope and despair, which had so long harassed her; and for a few hours she felt better and more at ease. But when our grief is one that sinks deep into our souls, although we feel it at first comparatively little, “bear it wonderfully well” as nurses say, yet the pain that has first stunned us, at last awakens us, and never sleeps more. The whole of that day passed over pretty well; Bianca employed herself resolutely, and called up a sort of scornful indignation to her support. A truly great soul never feels so surely convinced of its own worth, as at the moment of undeserved humiliation; Bianca felt that she had deserved better at the hands of Conrad. But she still loved him with the whole force of her nature, and the need of *forgiving* him lay in her soul. A truly loving heart can find no solace in anger. The dreary weariness of a love without hope began to press heavily upon her; there remained nothing more for her to do, nothing but to sit down to *endure*. She heard accidentally of Conrad’s departure, and that only seemed to add another leaden weight to her heavy life. She struggled courageously to keep up to her work, and she did it. None who saw her acting night after night with so much tenderness and passion, could guess the frightful collapse that ensued. The condition in which she spent the intermediate time was horrible. The agony of her soul produced spasms of real bodily pain. She was astonished

at the misery which had befallen her; it seemed too great for any one to endure it and live. There is suffering so vivid, so infinite in its aspect, that the sufferer cannot believe that it is in very deed laid upon him to endure it. He looks upon it as some terrific jest of fate, not intended to be carried out;—and when it flashes upon him that there *is* this affliction really existing in all its tragic, stern, rock-like reality, filling with its hard dark presence the whole length and breadth of his horizon, crushing him down so that he can feel nothing else, can discern nothing else before, behind, or on all sides of him—he believes it can never pass away, but will always continue then as now: for the torture of the present is too intense to leave strength for hope,—for any thing but the weary wondering how nature can endure so much and not loose her hold on life. At times Bianca rallied, and the paroxysms of intense anguish faded into a stupified calm, to rouse her again to suffer with renewed intensity, till she could realise the awful description of wretches in everlasting torment, “they gnawed their tongues for anguish.” Then with all this there was the damning self-contempt, the consciousness of the unavailing helplessness of her misery,—of a stern originality to *her* alone,—to the rest of the world a common tale of no meaning. She struggled on, however, during the month that remained of her engagement; at the end of that time she was in such a deplorable state of weakness and prostration, that her servant called in a medical man. Lord Melton, who had been out of town on business, was terrified on his return

to see the ravages four weeks had made in Bianca. She had fallen into a torpid melancholy, and now that the necessity of rousing herself to appear at the theatre was over, she seemed like a curious piece of mechanism, which has run itself down and stopped. She had become utterly indifferent to all that passed around her, and could be roused by nothing; she scarcely noticed Lord Melton on his return.


"I do not disguise from you, my lord," said the physician, "that although there is no organic disease, there is such an alarming debility and general prostration that the worst results may follow. Medicine can do little for her; there ought to be a complete change of scene. If she has any friends they should be sent for, the sight of them might act upon her beneficially. It is a moral influence alone that can be of any benefit; medicine can do nothing, for there is no specific disease to act upon."

"Then you recommend change of air?" said Lord Melton.

"Most assuredly," was the reply; "she should be taken to the sea-side; but anywhere would do, provided the change be complete. She must be removed immediately, or I will not answer for the consequences."

"How long has she been in this dangerous state?" asked Lord Melton. "She was not so when I left town a fortnight ago."

"She has broken down all at once," said the physician. "I saw her the last night she played, and I never witnessed a more admirable performance."



Bianca had no friends, no relatives in the world. Admired, flattered, successful as she had been, she had yet no hold on society, no *home*; she was alone, but for her confidential servant, in her deepest need; she belonged to nobody; the reed to which she had clung had broken in her grasp and drifted away, leaving her to sink in the deep waters that were overwhelming her soul.

Lord Melton was inexpressibly touched by the loneliness and abandonment in which he saw her. The passionateness of a lover seemed to merge itself in the thoughtful tenderness of a brother.

After considering awhile he wrote to his only sister, who lived in Devonshire, telling her all the facts of the case so far as he could without compromising Bianca's secret, and begging her to come and fetch her to stay with her for a little at Willersdale Park.

CHAPTER V.

LADY VERNON (Lord Melton's sister) was a widow, and many years older than himself. Left with a handsome jointure, and possessing an estate in her own right, she had, besides, as much to occupy her time and thoughts as any woman need desire. She was a large, tall, majestic-looking woman, with the remains of great personal beauty. She was rather peremptory and decided in her manners, but kind, conscientious, and enlightened in her ideas. She had lost all her children in their childhood, which gave a touch of sadness to her character, and softened what would have been otherwise too firm and unbending. (Neither men nor women are good for any thing who have not been well broken up by suffering.) She was intensely proud, and a great stickler for family honours and genealogies; was learned in the heraldic natural history of all the species of lions, bears, griffins, stags, talbots, wiverns, and every kind of bird, beast, or impossibility which figures on the "coat armours," as Sir Symond d'Ewes calls them, of all the nobility and more important gentry in England. She had the

greatest possible respect for ancient descent. She lived in a dignified retirement at her seat of Willersdale Park, seldom coming up to town, but giving her whole attention to the management of her tenantry.

The house was an extremely ill-favoured red-brick building, in the Dutch style, of the time of William and Mary, but it had a sober substantial look withal; her equipage and establishment were in keeping with it.

She had no taste for actresses; they were entirely out of her line. Certainly there were instances of some of them marrying amongst the nobility, but it was not a precedent she at all admired, and she was much afraid lest her brother should be induced to follow it.

When she received her brother's letter, she was at first much put out of the way, but his reliance on the innate goodness of her character was not disappointed. She did not feel at all tempted to receive an actress as an inmate of her staid respectable abode; but on the other hand, she was touched at the picture of Bianca's lonely and mournful position. She quickly made up her mind, and actually arrived in London before her brother had begun to calculate on an answer to his letter.

"My dearest Margaret," cried he, "this is kind and good and worthy of you; it is all I could have desired. If you only knew how much I love you for it!"

"Well, well," said his sister, "I am an old woman, and I did not know what scandalous stories might be

set going about the poor young thing, if you were the only person seen much about her, so I thought I had better come myself and give my personal sanction to her."

"Poor girl, she is too ill to be sensible of it," said Lord Melton, hardly able to repress a smile at his sister's idea of sanctioning an illness; "but you are good and considerate all the same."

"The character of a young woman in her position is so soon whispered away, and nobody believes in brotherly love in these days," said Lady Vernon. "I am not going to take *you* back with me," continued she, "I dare say you would like to go well enough; but I shall not have you; if you are very good, I may perhaps invite you down on a visit while she stays; but I am not too sure that I shall."

It had never struck Lord Melton that he was not to accompany Bianca; he had quite settled in his own mind how delightful it would be to continue near her, to watch over her, and he felt terribly disappointed; however, it would not do to contradict his sister, so he submitted, though not with the best grace.

"When do you think she will be ready to travel?" asked Lady Vernon, again.

"The sooner, the better, the physician said."

"Well then, the day after to-morrow, let it be; I want to get home again; the noise of these streets does not suit me at all. And now, if you are ready, we will go and see the poor thing."

On the day named, Bianca was removed in Lady

Vernon's carriage, by easy journeys, towards Willersdale Park; and Lord Melton undertook to arrange the business affairs, which her sudden illness had rendered her unable herself to see to.

On arriving, Bianca was installed by Lady Vernon in two pleasant rooms, opening out of each other, looking on the garden, and commanding a pleasant view of the country beyond. In less than a week, the total change of scene, the pure air, and perfect quiet, had wrought such a change for the better, that she was able to walk in the garden, and to be taking long drives every day. She was still very silent, but the deep gloom that had hung over her seemed lessened. She was able occasionally to rouse herself to reply to Lady Vernon, and to notice what was passing around. At the end of a month she was like one recovering from a deep stupor, and coming back gradually to the use of her faculties. She did not again relapse into her former black melancholy; but continued steadily to regain strength and cheerfulness—at least outwardly. She was not yet up to any sort of occupation; and Lady Vernon wisely and kindly left it to time, to perfect her recovery.

One day, rather earlier than usual, when Bianca descended to the library, which was Lady Vernon's usual sitting-room, she found her sitting before a table covered with work-boxes, prettily bound books, pictures, and trinkets of various kinds.

"Are you about to open a bazaar?" asked Bianca, in some surprise.

"Oh no, my dear, these are the prizes for my school;

the girls go home to-morrow, and we are to have a grand examination this afternoon before the prizes are distributed; do you feel at all inclined to assist at it? We shall have a sort of feast afterwards; do you think you are strong enough?"

"I feel as if I should like to go very much," said Bianca, "but what school is it?—they cannot be poor children for whom such beautiful prizes are intended."


"No," said Lady Vernon, "they belong to a class which, to my thinking, needs thoroughly educating a great deal more than the children of the actual poor. They are girls born in a more pretentious sphere of life, in the odour of gentility, but without sufficient means to get a thorough education, or to be perfectly comfortable in their attempts to keep up what they fancy to be the proper appearances of the condition in life to which they are pleased to consider themselves as belonging. Half-educated, full of vain notions, and leading a life of painful effort and pretence to appear richer and genteeler, than is, to say the least, *spontaneous* to their position, these girls are vain, useless, trifling, and what to my mind is worse than all the rest, irredeemably *vulgar*; for ingrained vulgarity cannot exist without being symptomatic of many graver faults of character. I am not speaking of any conventionalisms of etiquette and external manner; what I mean, is a deep-seated pretentiousness to a better appearance in every way than they have any intention or power to realise, but one still striven after, for the sole purpose of making other people *think* this, that, or the other—which is not a fact, but only

meant to be thought one. The poor things have nothing to go upon, no reality of any sort about them, except their vanity; and where any reverse happens by the death of their parents, misfortunes in business, or what not, such as deprives them of their means of living, shoals of these young women are thrown on the world utterly incapable of work, and, whether they are 'ashamed' or not, 'to beg' is very unprofitable! No habits of discipline or self-denial have been given to them, and what are they to do? They have not the virtue to hang themselves out of the road, but go,—hundreds of them,—to a far worse destruction both of body and soul."

"Well, and your school," said Bianca, seeing that the good lady had talked herself out of breath.

"I am coming to that," said Lady Vernon; "I like to begin at the beginning. On one side of the park there was a spacious house and large garden, which happening to be vacant, I fitted up for a school about ten years ago, and put at the head of it a woman for whom I have a thorough respect, and who had been regularly educated to the business of tuition, and had not taken it up as an amateur means of getting a living. The parents of the girls pay fifteen pounds a-year, for I don't want it to be a charity school, and they also supply them with clothes. For this sum the girls are boarded and thoroughly educated. First, we begin with all useful things, such as writing, arithmetic, grammar, and so forth; they are then initiated in all the mysteries of 'plain work,' as it is called, and are taught to make their own dresses: for it is perfectly dreadful the

sums that young women spend at their mantua-maker's. When they are tolerably skilful in practical matters, then those who have any taste for accomplishments may learn them; but if they take them up, they are to learn *thoroughly*, and not a mere smattering. They are taught professionally, so that if needs be, they may either teach again or employ them as a means of earning a livelihood. Those who show any taste, are instructed in the art of wood-engraving, etching, designing patterns for embroiderers; there is another branch I have lately thought of, that of designing for calico printers; it has not come to much yet, but it is quite feasible, and all of them may be followed by young women in their own houses,—a great advantage. If any wish to learn music or singing, they are taught, but it is on the condition that they are to learn *thoroughly* and severely; so that, if they are cast on their own resources, there is something for them to fall back upon. The masters I select and pay myself, and I know them all to be competent and conscientious. Some of the departments are filled by girls who were formerly pupils in the establishment. It is not so much what they learn, after all, that is the most valuable—it is the habit which is burnt into them of being in earnest, of doing *thoroughly* all they profess to do; *that* is a principle which will enable them to go through life, and is the beginning, middle, and end of wisdom. With young girls, of course, a good deal goes by fashion; that I cannot help; but at least the prevailing notion in the school is, that it is disgraceful to put *words* for *things*.



They dress all alike, and wear white in summer and black in winter; for I wish them to get modest and becoming notions of dress, and they cannot go very far wrong so long as they keep to those two colours. Of course I have entirely my own way with the girls, I make that a stipulation, so I have no sort of plague with the parents. Well, my dear, it is only a mite, to be sure, but I have the comfort of knowing that a few, at least, of the rising generation, are turned out thoroughly taught and with good notions of industry; and my hope is, that they will prove a little leaven leavening a great mass of idleness, folly, and frivolity, with sentiments befitting responsible and rational creatures. Girls, in general, get a smattering of all sorts of knowledge, but they are not taught that these lessons mean something,—they are not impressed with the imperative necessity of having their life guided by strong principle; they subside into helplessness and idleness: harmless they may be, so long as no evil presents itself, but they are at the mercy of the first strong temptation that offers."

"Do you make them go to church?" asked Bianca.

"Yes," said Lady Vernon, "I let them go regularly enough; but it is not the vague instruction they hear there that will do them good or harm. I am an old-fashioned church-woman myself, but people must get the principles they can lead their lives by elsewhere than from the pulpit in these days; nobody can make much of the sermons preached there."

"I should like to go with you very much," said Bianca, "if you will take me. When do you start?"

"After luncheon—and here it comes!—but, my dear, I don't want to trepan you; and so I give you fair warning it will be a long affair."

"Oh, I feel quite up to it," said Bianca.

As soon as luncheon was despatched, the carriage came round, and they speedily arrived at a pleasant, old-fashioned family house, with a large walled garden at the back, and in the front a lawn, sheltered from the road by several fine old trees. The number of girls was about five-and-twenty, of different ages. They were remarkable only for an extreme composure of manner, and a quiet, earnest look, which pleased Bianca much.

"They are very lady-like in their appearance," whispered she.

"I don't think they consider much about how they look," said Lady Vernon, "and that may be the reason!"

Their proficiency was examined into by Lady Vernon, who also inspected the work they had done during the half year, and the prizes were distributed, though all received something in the shape of a reward. Afterwards, Bianca was introduced to the mistress—a lady about forty years of age—not at all clever-looking, but with a firm, decided, and yet benevolent expression of face, that looked as if she were quite competent to keep all who were under her control up to the mark.

Then followed the "feast," which Lady Vernon had provided, and a pleasant chattering evening ensued. There was a good deal of music;—one of the girls, a dark-eyed, passionate-looking girl of about sixteen,

attracted Bianca's notice. She was the principal musician of the school.

"You care a great deal for music?" said she to her.

"Yes," replied the girl; "I should like to go to Italy and learn to sing. I care for music more than any thing else in the world, and I never heard any to satisfy me, except once in a dream."

"And what do you want to do with your music, when you have learned?"

"I do not know; I have only thought yet that I desire to go to Italy, and to hear as much music as ever I can. Do you sing?" asked she. "I wish you would let me hear you."

"Well," said Bianca, good-naturedly, "what must I sing? I am very fond of this 'Mass' of Haydn's; I will see if I can find something from it."

Bianca had very little voice—but she had all an Italian's feeling for music, and had, besides, been obliged to study it, in some degree. She threw into it the same intellect and passionate earnestness that marked her acting, so that they who once heard her, rarely forgot her. She felt quite pleased to be able to give the girl pleasure, and sat down and sang every thing she could recollect, for more than an hour.

"Ah! that is something like the singing of my dream?" said the girl, with glistening eyes.

"Only I hope, my dear, for the credit of your musical angel, that it had a better voice," said Bianca, tapping her cheek.

But now Lady Vernon's carriage, which had been

standing a long time, could be kept no longer, and there was a general breaking up.

"You are not much fatigued, I hope," said Lady Vernon, as they drove home.

"Oh no, it has done me a great deal of good," said Bianca. "I have really enjoyed myself. What are you going to do with that girl who played so well?"

"I don't know," said Lady Vernon; "she is the first we have had with any decided musical talent, and I hardly know what to do with it. Music is apt to be such a dangerous endowment for women."

"But, my dear lady, dangerous or not dangerous, that girl has real genius, and she will become a singer. It is of no use rebelling against Providence; rather let me add my mite towards your good work. Let her go to the Academy when she has finished with you, and I will undertake to see after her."

"My dear soul," said Lady Vernon, "you are very good—very good, indeed; but we will hope better things. I should be very sorry, indeed, to bring one of my girls out as a professional singer. I don't like such people."

"Well," said Bianca, laughing, "promise me at least, that if circumstances prove too strong for you, and you change your views, that you will make me useful. How long has your school been established? It must be a very expensive affair."

"Well, so it is," replied her ladyship. "I have only had it working for ten years. Before then, I used to mess away my funds with helping protégées, who,

do what I would, always kept falling from lowest deeps, to lower depths of helplessness; or, in subscribing to this, that, or the other society—things I took no real interest in; and I began at last to consider that with all my income, I ought to produce a better result than I was doing; and that I had a responsibility laid upon me, which I was not adequately discharging. About this time, the case of a family which had moved in rather genteel circles was left, by the death of the father, in utter destitution; without money, without any well-to-do relations to help them, and without the necessary energy to help themselves; the girls were ignorant and pretty-looking; educated enough to pass muster in a drawing-room, but utterly incompetent to take any sort of situation; they were not even fit for ladies'-maids; they could not thread a needle—they were useless. Still the poor things could not starve, so I had them to stay a little while with me, and got my maid to teach them to do needle-work; and I tried to get them into orderly habits; and then I succeeded in finding for one of them a situation, something between that of a nursery governess and a *bonne*; and I also got the others placed in some light employment, where they might have made a respectable livelihood. But to earn one's own living requires something more than mere needing it; it requires discipline, patience, and self-denial. These girls were not bad, by any means; but they had been accustomed to idleness, to visiting, to flirting, and having their own way in all things; they had no strong principles to control them. I en-

couraged them all I could, and with very moderate perseverance, they might have done well: but before six months were over, one had eloped with an old lover, who took her 'under his protection,' as it is called; and the other, a short time afterwards, went on the streets: she was persuaded to try her fortune as a singer at one of the singing saloons, and her downward course was short enough, poor girl! This is one instance out of a hundred similar ones. *Protégées* always bring dissatisfaction; it is like meddling with fire-works—it is a thousand chances if they do not explode and burn your fingers; and so I began to think I would for the future have nothing more to do with such vexatious speculations, but that if I could do something for the *class* of girls to which my luckless *protégées* belonged, it would lessen the *supply* of cases of distress; and that it would be far better to turn out a few thoroughly-taught, well-principled young women, than to melt away my substance in affording a rickety assistance to those whom nothing would ever enable to walk alone. A case of great distress always stimulates somebody's sensibilities; any thing very palpable always does; but the need of help and instruction before matters come to extremities is not so striking, so every body must work at what seems to them most desirable. I never in my heart took cordially to all that 'society' work, and I am quite sure now, that it was very well for me that I got out of it. I have found something at which I can work heartily; I believe that I am doing at least a *mite* of usefulness; and so people must do as well as they can in this world."

"You have a real vocation for education," said Bianca, laughing, "it is a pity you were not born a governess."

"No, my dear, I could not have had my present influence, or have carried out my plans so much as I do, if my bread had depended on my teaching. As 'Lady Vernon' I am quite independent, and my 'ladyship' gives me a vast weight with the fathers and mothers I want to persuade. My dear child, you don't know all the difficulties I met with before my school was set to work; the false pride, the pretentiousness, the vulgarity—to say nothing of any thing else, that I have had to tame and smooth down—it would take a day to tell you about: however, it only showed me the necessity of what I was striving to do, and made me more determined to go on. People have a fancy, that a certain class of virtues, called the common principles of morality, are indigenous, in all but very poor people. Now, this is a great mistake. They need a vast deal of cultivation,—certainly a misty tradition concerning picking and stealing, and the necessity of young females being modest and virtuous, pervades all decent society; but nobody seems to know how much goes to make up these qualities of honesty and virtue. They are not to be improvised in a moment, neither do they come as a matter of course, the moment there is a call for them; and yet an immense number of the young women who move in a respectable sphere have no more guiding principles of actions taught them, than if they were so many cats. When any

emergency arises, and there is any stress to prove what is really in their hearts, it is no wonder so many extraordinary lapses occur in persons, who had, in their prosperity, seemed of correct and unexceptionable conduct. There is a great fuss about giving women a negative purity of mind, but there is no care taken to give them any strong *antiseptic* qualities, whereby they may *resist* evil. But what a prosing I have given you ! and how sleepy you must be !”

“ No,” said Bianca, “ I take great interest in the subject. I have been thinking that if it had not been for my good old priest at Birmingham,—what would have become of me ? Really I owe a great deal to a few strong and very definite exhortations he once gave me, when I was quite a girl, and placed in circumstances which brought a deal of evil under my eyes. One word spoken in season often helps us in after times, when those who spoke it have long since forgotten it.”

“ Very true,” said Lady Vernon ; “ but now let us go to bed, you have sat up much too late. By the way, Melton comes here to-morrow ; he will only remain a few days.”

“ I shall be very glad to see him again,” said Bianca, as she went up stairs.

The next morning Lord Melton arrived. He had thought his sister’s invitation a long time in coming ; but he was quite pacified when he saw the improvement in Bianca’s appearance. She was quite well enough now to be amused, and to bear company. Lady

Vernon gave several parties; they were an entirely different style of people to any Bianca had ever seen—country gentry, who did not often go up to London.

Lord Melton was Bianca's constant companion. Lady Vernon was often engaged with her own private affairs, so they were a good deal alone together. He read to her, rode out with her on horseback, took long walks with her; and every thing in the shape of books, or music, or new caricatures that he fancied could amuse her, was brought down for her. To Bianca, Lord Melton was a dear and valued brother; to Lord Melton, Bianca became every day an object of deeper and stronger attachment, and he was not at all satisfied with the calm regard she accorded to him: still he was willing to "bide his time," and carefully refrained from overstepping, by any undue warmth of manner, the friendly relation into which she had accepted him; and as there was no rival to dispute with him Bianca's undivided attention, he made himself tolerably contented. At first his visits did not exceed a few days each time, but they gradually became longer, till at last Willersdale Park seemed to have become his natural home.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE evening after tea, as the ladies were sitting at work round the lamp, Lord Melton took up a book that had arrived that day from town, and volunteered to read aloud to them.

It chanced to be a novel which had just come out with a great success, as a highly moral book: one of the Reviews said of it, "*Une mère en permettrait la lecture à sa fille.*"

After reading and skipping and looking on to the end, he at length flung down the book, exclaiming,

"Upon my honour, I can stand this no longer. How can you both sit there so patiently, to listen to such twaddle of rose-coloured imitation-virtue. You know well enough that human nature utterly renounces all affinity with nine-tenths of the stuff that is put into books to pass for high morality. It is just one more roll to the monster ball of vague opinions, which is ever accumulating and filling up the world. There you sit, both of you calling yourselves sensible women, yet neither of you ever lifting your voice to protest against all the nonsense

specially consecrated to the description of the virtues proper to your sex. The devil is the father of lies, and I wish he would fly away with all his children, instead of leaving them to run wild over the world; but he is without natural affection, or else this thing would not be here."

As he spoke, he jerked the unlucky book to the other end of the room, narrowly escaping the destruction of a choice vase of Indian china, and actually dislodging a glass of flowers which stood beside it.

"Oh, my precious china!" cried Lady Vernon. "Maurice, Maurice, another time do make a virtuous demonstration at your own risk, and not amongst my frail treasures. Only think what mischief you might have done!"

"Luckily for us all," replied her brother, "there is a broad margin to the possibilities of this world, and nothing is so bad or so good as it ought logically to be. I might have broken your china, but I did not, so there is no harm done. Forgive the shock I have caused to your feminine susceptibilities. It has calmed my zeal."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Lady Vernon, laughing; "and perhaps you will descend from the heights of declamation to the special details of what you wish Bianca and myself to do."

"In the first place, I would have you both enter your own protests against those opinions which are taken up by society on different points, but which nobody means, nobody believes, and nobody thinks of practising. Shrugging your shoulders, and saying, *sotto voce*, 'I

don't agree, though it won't do to say so,' is not sufficient; society, civilised society, is enamelled in cant. Every pore is stopped, and a thick veneer of **MAKE BELIEVE** is spread over every thing. What a talk for instance there is just now about the condition of women; and how much do you think can come out of all that is said, sung, and written upon the subject? It is quite deplorable, and I thank God every time I say my prayers that He did not make me a woman to be given over to patent moralists."

"There is no making us profit by them, that is one comfort," said Bianca.

"Allah Akbar ! God is great and nature is powerful, or else the world would be in a sad case," replied Lord Melton. "Stifle Nature, endeavour to muffle her in sententious rose-coloured phrases as much as you will, every now and then she asserts her own reality, '*avec explosion*,' as the French dramatists say,—to the great relief of the social system."

"Grand explosions of nature are not at all safe transactions," rejoined Lady Vernon. "Can you suggest no quieter method of regenerating society in general, and the condition of women in particular? I agree with you to the very extent as to the rose-coloured sort of morality generally imputed to them and exacted from them, but they should not be taught to laugh at that till they have learned something better."

"But," said Lord Melton, "what is radically *false*, can give no strength. Women have a great deal of modesty, delicacy, and feminine refinement, but they

are not taught the principles from which these ought to spring as natural fruits. Certain qualities are praised, but it is like children who make a garden by sticking full-blown flowers into the ground and expecting them to keep their bloom. Those who instruct them do not go to the real principle which shall teach them to discern right from wrong, nor give them any strong truths by which to guide their steps amongst the temptations and delusions which beset them; therefore we find that all the talk they have heard about 'graceful modesty' and 'female delicacy,' does not enable them to stand against the stern reality of a strong temptation. Propriety cannot swallow up passion."

"A rabid fit of truth-telling seems to have taken possession of you," said his sister, "and you have taken possession of that easy vantage-ground of general declamation, which all objectors and theoretical reformers find such a pleasant dwelling place; but come out of it for once, and if you can suggest any practical thing that women can do to mend themselves, I, as a woman, will thank you most gratefully. Women would be only too thankful for wise guidance, and it is precisely what they do not get."

"Nay," said Lord Melton, "I can suggest no compendious system of morals like the receipts in the 'Housekeepers' Manual,'—the spirit must be renovated before the details can be amended. Was it not in the Sandwich Islands that Captain Cook was invited to a grand banquet, at which the chief, by way of doing him honour, first masticated all the choice morsels, and then

transferred them to his guest all ready for swallowing. That is the sort of way in which women's minds are fed. They are kept in a state of perpetual childishness,—not *childhood*—that is a graceful and natural state. Women out-grow childhood without attaining a developed and matured nature. I know an immense number of women, of one sort or other, and hardly one of them seems to have attained the practical sense of a school-boy. Their personal gifts and graces developed, they learn the art of society, they obtain power and influence over men in right of their fascinations, but they have no foundation of a real knowledge of things to back their empire. Whenever it happens that, instead of talking, they have to take a practical step for themselves, they have nothing to go upon; and, in earning their experience, it is ten chances to one but they ruin their reputation."

"Women, in general, have no settled occupation," said Bianca, looking up. "Those who have families, have, indeed, a legitimate employment, enough to employ all their energies. Those women, too, who have to gain their own living, have their hands pretty full. But, with these exceptions, women lead a life of nonentity, so far as the *real value* of their occupation goes. All they do is to pass away the time, and it is of little real consequence whether it be done or let alone. Look, for instance, at the great body of unmarried women, in the middle classes—they spend their days in the same kind of trifling that slaves in the East amuse themselves with, till some one comes to put them into a harem. They want an object, they want a strong purpose, they want an

adequate employment,—in exchange for a precious life. Days, months, years of perfect leisure run by, and leave nothing but a sediment of *ennui*: and at length they have all vitality choked out of them. This is the true evil of the condition of women. The need of some sort of a stimulant becomes, at last, an imperative necessity—it is the cry of their expiring souls, an impulse of self-preservation; they possess unsatisfied, unemployed powers of mind—a strong vitality of nature, that must consume them, unless an adequate, legitimate employment be provided for them. They must find something that is *worth* being done; voluntary employment will not stave off the evil. The very possession of existence inspires a desire for activity, and it is melancholy to see the blind vague efforts women make to be useful; they do their various things, not as an imperative duty, but because they have ‘plenty of time,’ and play at being Lady Bountifuls and lady patronesses to poor people, to get rid of their own weariness. I do not set myself up as an example of what women in general should be, but this one blessing I have had to counterbalance the many questionable items in my position, I have had a definite employment all my life: when I rose in the morning my work lay before me, and I had a clear, definite channel in which all my energies might flow. I was without social position, I had no friends, no respectability; often wanted food. I had to struggle with vexations in my daily life enough to break any one’s heart, in daily contact with most un-

desirable environments; but with all this I was kept clear of ENNUI, which eats like a leprosy into the life of women. I was leading a life of my own, and was able to acquire a full control over my own faculties; and I have always had a sense of freedom, of enjoyment of my existence, which has rendered all my vexations easy to be borne. I would not, I tell you again, wish the generality of women to resemble me. I have had too much struggling: I am become in some degree hard and coarse from my contact with the harsh realities of life; but I *do* say that the idea of my life has been true. I have had work to do, and I have done it. I have had a purpose, and have endeavoured to work it out; and I say that if you could furnish women with a definite object, or address motives in them fit to animate rational beings, you would have a race of wives and daughters far different from those which now flourish in your drawing-rooms; the quality of their nature would be elevated; they would be able to aid men in any noble object by noble thoughts, by self-denial, by real sympathy and fellowship of heart, nor would they, as is the case too often now, aid a cause by merely pressing their vanity into the service of their charity, and think they have done all that is needed when they have raised a few pounds by dedicating their amusements to an object of charity, to give it a zest, and make them fancy it some new thing."

"But, my dear Bianca," said Lady Vernon, "you are like Melton, keeping to safe generalities. How, in the present state of society, are women to be employed?"

They cannot all work for their bread, and what is there for them to do? Women's employments are so limited."

"I told you," replied Bianca, "that there was no compendious receipt to improve the condition of women; their present position has been of gradual growth, and has all the disadvantages of a transition state. They used to be subordinate to men in every sense; they were household servants—*bond-women*, in short: they are now become ornamental appendages, and enjoy a sort of fictitious existence and consideration; language, as somebody said, 'has been mystified for the use of women,' and a whole set of elegant virtues has been invented for their special adornment—an improvement I grant, but not enough: not REAL enough to govern wisely their frail, passionate, wayward nature, or to meet the height and depth of their necessities."

"Well," said Lord Melton, "I have listened to you both, as in duty bound, seeing you both belong to the class of the patients, but I think there is too much talk going on for much good to come out of it, and my idea would be that in the present stage of the business all the women of England should be shut up in what Catholics call 'RETREAT':—they should be alone, and have nothing to do but to sit down and consider what it is they have been taught all their lives, how much of it they really believe, and how much of it they have ever practised; they should have to consider what is a real matter of conscience, and what only a matter of convention; they should have to examine themselves

truly as to what it is they really love, and what are the things they REALLY hate, and what, candidly speaking, they care nothing at all about. Of course they would not be expected to reveal the result of these considerations, it should all be for their own private satisfaction. It would be some time before they *could* be sincere with themselves,—before they could strip off all the moral flannel-waistcoats, steel-collars, and go-carts, in which they have walked all the days of their life; but they would be able to do it in time. They should have no books; neither should they have pen, ink, or paper to write diaries or confessions with; four bare walls should be all they had to see; if you chose to be rigorous, a diet of bread and water might be added. They should come out thence, and begin their life anew; their actual occupation might not be materially changed, but the spirit in which they would pursue it would be different: the face of society would be renewed, for the very well-spring and fountain would have been cleansed. I believe with that great man, who said—‘*Reality and perfection are the same thing.*’ ”

“I see only one objection,” said Lady Vernon. “One half of your fair penitents would hang themselves in despair of making any thing out of the *chiffonage*, to which their life had been reduced.”

“Those who have not strength, or grasp of principle strong enough, to enable them to amend their ways when they perceive their errors, and to conduct themselves in a way worthy the possessors of that solemn reality

called *Life*, and of their high calling in being modes of God's manifestation upon earth, ought to depart to Hades—the region of ineffectualities.”

“Good Heaven!” said Lady Vernon, looking at her watch; “it is nearly two o'clock,—to bed! to bed! to bed!”

CHAPTER VII.

BIANCA remained three months an inmate with Lady Vernon, recovering both her bodily health and her moral strength after the painful shock which had so nearly destroyed her. The first symptom of her returning energy was a desire to return to the fatigue and excitement of her old way of life. She began to re-act against the repose and elegant employments around her. Letters of business, which had followed her from London and been thrown aside in disgust and helplessness, now began to claim her attention. She felt the need of something to do, and made arrangements for visiting several of the chief provincial towns. A few days after the conversation recorded in the last chapter, she announced, at breakfast, her intention of leaving Willersdale Park that day week.

"Nonsense, my dear, nonsense," said Lady Vernon ;
"I am not going to part with you; and where do you want to go to? and what do you want to go for? I cannot understand such a sudden freak at all, and you will just stay peaceably where you are until you get quite well.—Why, Melton," said she to her brother,

who just then entered the room, "what do you think, here is Bianca talking of going away next week! It is quite out of the question."

Lord Melton felt a very disagreeable shock when he heard his sister's abrupt announcement; he had all along known that Bianca could not stay with his sister for ever; but he had put off thinking of the evil day, and now it had come on him unawares. He could not at once say any thing, but his change of countenance was not lost on Bianca, who felt the more how needful it was for her to get away.


"I must indeed leave you, my kind friends," said she; "I am not yet able to lead a life of quiet and ease for long together—it is the vice of my nature. I have been on the stretch and struggle all my life, and I cannot subside at once into respectable and still life; so you must let me go now. I will, if possible, return to you at Christmas—if you will take in such a vagabond again?"

"Ah, you miss the excitement you have been accustomed to; and excitement is such a bad thing, when it is the staple of life," said Lady Vernon. "My dear girl, how can you give yourself up to it? With all your superiority, and fine perceptions of what is refined and beautiful, how can you tolerate such coarse excitement and such a glaring trashy mode of existence? I am speaking to you now, in my right of being an old woman, and you will forgive me for saying that it strikes me as the only shade in your character!"

"It is the shadow of the substance, my dear Lady


Vernon, and you could not change it without changing my character altogether. You forget that I am a vagabond born, and with as clear a vocation for being an ACTRESS, as any of the saints of old had for being martyrs—I could have done nothing else in the world. I needed to have all the restless energy worked out of me. If I had been born in a respectable sphere of life, I should have infallibly gone to the devil, and brought shame and confusion on my peaceable kindred. My natural tendencies would all have been violently crushed down. I should have found no opening for my energies in the smoothly-compacted surface of female existence. God gave me my talents, such as they are, and I should have been possessed as by a demon, if I had not been able to give free scope to them. I am not so good as you think me, by any means ; and if I am worth any thing, it is the real hard work I have had to go through, which has made me so.”

“ That may sound very well,” replied Lady Vernon, “ but when one thinks of the *sort* of work it is on which you have spent your life, one can feel no respect for it. I am not speaking of you individually, but of your way of life, which is altogether worthless, and unworthy of any immortal being. Your whole life is spent in dressing yourself up, and pretending to be that which you are not. Oh, I wish I could say any thing to induce you to give up that mode of life which is so especially dreadful when followed by a woman—nothing shall make me believe you like it.”



“We all live in our own meridian,” said Bianca; “and can see only our own horizon. You cannot think how strange all you are saying sounds to my ears. You will laugh, when I tell you that I have often wondered how women, who were *not* actresses, contrived to pass their time; what they could find to do when they had their whole day free from any large occupation,—no rehearsal for three hours in the morning, no long performance in the evening,—to say nothing of hard study between the times. I can see quite well the sort of look my life bears to you, but to *me* it has quite another aspect. So far from despising it, I am passionately fond of it. I do not deny that I enjoy my success, but I have a higher aim; I hope to elevate my profession into one of the fine arts,—to see it ennobled, and freed from the meretricious degradation into which it has sunk. I see all that might be made of it. Any thing considered merely as an amusement becomes despicable. But the stage requires so much from its professors; it so takes their life and soul, their very life-blood, that it ought to have higher capabilities and nobler tendencies than merely to serve as a vehicle to amuse the *ennui*, or to occupy the idleness of an audience. I do not scruple to confess to you that the applause I receive is sweet, and that I should find it very hard to live without it; it is the seal and token that I have produced the effect I aimed at. You do not know what you say, when you speak of it as coarse excitement merely. You do not know the sense

of power there is in seeing hundreds of men and women congregated together, and to know that I can make all that assembled multitude laugh, weep, or experience any emotion I please to excite:—there is positive intoxication in it, and I would not change that *real* power to become a queen, and have to work my will through the cumbrous machinery of a government. I act directly upon my subjects, and the **EFFECT** follows instantly upon my effort. I *see* all I produce; and I cannot express to you the *zest*, the intoxication, the delirious enjoyment of a successful performance; it gives a sense of *power*, that for the time elevates one above mortality. It does not last, certainly. I have sunk down weary and fainting after this fierce excitement. Then there is the depression of having constantly before me an ideal I cannot attain, and of knowing that those who applaud so vehemently, do so only because they do not discern it as I must. All I have achieved looks as nothing beside that which I am striving to attain: but it is out of my very discouragement that I have learned knowledge which triumph cannot give; it is out of my hours of blackness and despondency that I have learned my secrets, and have risen again for the struggle. Strength comes out of weakness left by the fatigues of labour. Give up my profession!—no! not if it were in ten times worse repute than it is: so much the more need would there be to redeem it. My dearest Lady Vernon, you can talk better than I, but come and see me **ACT**, and then I



will make you feel more respect for my profession ; any way, it is my destiny to be an actress, and I must work it out."

" Well, go then, Bianca," said Lord Melton, sadly ; " go now, but come back to us when you are wearied ; the glory that dazzles you will soon disappear—art, for its own sake, never satisfied a woman's heart yet."

" And that is the reason women have generally achieved so little," replied Bianca ; " they do not serve their art with that singleness of mind and oneness of purpose which all art requires—it is jealous, and admits no rival. For me, I have now no second thought to divide my devotion, and henceforth I belong altogether to my work."

She felt sorry she had spoken so warmly, when she saw the cloud that settled over Lord Melton's countenance. He was deeply pained by her last words, and after a pause, he said :

" Whilst you are following your destiny in your own way, I shall carry out a project I have long entertained—I shall travel in the East, to see Jerusalem, Thebes, the Pyramids, and ' the Zodiac's brazen mysteries.'"

Bianca now flinched in her turn. " Ah !" said she, with a slight shudder, " I hate the word '*travel*,' it has cost me so much. Am I to lose you, too ?"

" You are like all women," said Lord Melton, pettishly ; " you care for nothing until it is taken away from you. When I am three thousand miles out of

your reach, you will perhaps think of me with kindness; any way, the experiment is worth trying."

So saying, he quitted the room.

Bianca fancied it was only a spasm of temper, that would soon pass away; but the cloud drew darker. There was nothing to lay hold of, nothing to complain of, but the distance increased every day between them; he was kind as ever, but there was a grave, polite, displeasure visible through all; he avoided all private conversation with her, and whenever they chanced to be alone, he evaded all her attempts to come to an understanding.

The day Bianca had fixed for her departure arrived, they were together for a moment after breakfast.

"Maurice," said she, hastily, "why are you displeased?—tell me what I have done. I cannot bear to depart thus; let us be friends."

"Friends, certainly, we *are* friends," replied Lord Melton, gravely, taking no notice of the hand she had stretched out to him. "You may rely upon me ever, as you would upon your own brother."

"But why are you so changed, so cold? It kills me to think that I have displeased you."

"Bianca, it is of no use trying to cool down a volcano and make it a comfortable drawing-room fire. You know it is *not* as a *brother* that I have cared for you; it is mere trifling to talk as you do. I cannot afford to consume my life in a fruitless passion; these last three months have been very pleasant, too pleasant, and I tell you frankly that I am going away in the hope

of forgetting you. I have ceased to have any hope of winning you. You would not have left us thus, without saying any thing to me of your arrangements, had you not ——”

Lady Vernon entered before he could finish his sentence; the carriage came to the door, and there remained nothing but the bustle of departure. Bianca departed more depressed and melancholy than she had believed any thing could ever make her again.

Lord Melton kept his word and made immediate preparations for his departure, but he was detained more than a month before they were complete. During the whole of this time Bianca did not hear from him; she only knew from his sister's letters that he had left the Park and gone up to London. She felt very uneasy, but on the whole thought it best to let things take their course. One morning she received the following note:

“ Dear Friend,—I was very cross the morning you went away. I was a great brute, but I could not help it;—forgive me. I go on board in an hour, and purpose remaining absent a twelvemonth. If I die in that time, there will be an end of all that concerns me. If I forget you, there will be an end of my unfortunate love; but if I live, I expect to come back in the same mind, and I shall try my fortune with you once more. When you write to me, do not fancy that I am vexed or sulky. I care for you just as I have always done, and you know how that is; so do not go vexing yourself about

me, but be a good girl and take care of yourself. Write to me very often; you know I am your affectionate brother by your own confession, if I am nothing else, and I expect to be treated accordingly.

“MELTON.”

Bianca felt very glad when she received this letter; she fancied it was because Lord Melton had become more reasonable.

Lady Vernon wrote to her frequently, and she was soon too busy to have time for fanciful speculations.


CHAPTER VIII.

Letter from Bianca to Lord Melton.

“DEAR FRIEND,—I have been a long time in writing to you. I have a great deal to tell you ; so much, that I fear it will never all get said. I have been working very hard, and found it, at first, sad up-hill work, after the idle, pleasant life I had led so long. Whether it was that I had begun to look at things through your sister's eyes, or whether I had grown accustomed to better things, I do not know; but the fact was, that I nearly took a disgust to all the theatrical accessories, amongst which I had been living all my life. Every thing connected with the stage looked coarser than it had ever done before. Do not rejoice in the confession, for I have been too hard at work to have leisure for the cultivation of my susceptibilities, and they have died a natural death.

“I am now in the place where I first entered regularly on my profession; the scene of the first struggles, the hopes, the heavenly brightness of my life. I cannot

express to you the horrible complication of emotions with which I found myself here once more. I did not think that I had been such a weak fool—‘past is past, and gone is gone’—I am content that it should be so. Any thing that actually *is*, ranks higher than the most beautiful hopes that ever ‘gilded the eastern horizon!’ No, no, facts, realities, no matter how stern, are the only things I would ever desire to hold by; and so I have no regret for my past dreams—I *once* believed in them, NOW I have proved them to be only dreams: ‘*non ragionam di lor.*’ But all this is not what I was going to tell you. The old company to which I formerly belonged is all dispersed. Mr. Montague St. Leger, and all his glory, have passed away. It is an entire new set of people, except the old prompter, who once spoke a kind word to me when nobody else did; and it has been a real pleasure to me to see him again. I might be his daughter, the old man is so proud of my success, and that he prophesied it. He was so much affected on the first night of my appearance here, that he could not go on with his duty, and a substitute had to be found for the remainder of the evening. But neither is all this what I really wanted to say to you. I go on chattering, as children make a noise in the dark, to keep themselves from being frightened. Well, then—I have seen Conrad! I met him in the street, quite accidentally. I did not even know that he was in England. You may fancy I was horribly startled. He was calm, formal, and polite. God knows what I was. I came




home after it, stunned, shattered, miserable to the last degree. I had seen with my own eyes, I had realised, the fact of his supreme indifference for me. I was like a criminal long left under sentence of death, who fancies he has become reconciled to his fate and weaned from life, but when suddenly brought out to suffer, finds that the cold definite reality passes all understanding. There is no hope in a reality; it is what it is, and there is no escape from it. My dear friend, I, too, have gazed on the face of a reality that has turned all my passion to stone.

"A few days after the *rencontre* I went to pay a visit to Mrs. Bryant, who befriended me once when I much needed a friend. I was ushered into the drawing-room, and there I found Conrad again! Things, in this world, seem to move in a cycle; things, people, circumstances, all come round again into their old position, and yet the result is so different. Five years ago I was here, acting at the same theatre, playing the self-same characters, Alice was my friend, Conrad was on a visit there, all the circumstances were similar, and yet how changed in their significance!

"Alice received me kindly; was, I am convinced, glad in her heart to see me; but there was a constraint in her manner, evidently a fear lest any one should call and find an *actress* sitting there. Conrad assumed a quite different manner to what I have ever noticed in him before, a contemptuous, supercilious politeness, as if all women of my class were established in a species of

recognised degradation. Fleury, the French actor, mentions in his memoirs, that the men of fashion in the old régime never condescended to say MADAME to a Bourgeoise, or a woman in a shop, but addressed them as ‘*Ma’mé*’ so and so,—a delicate shade of impertinence, that proved them masters in the art. Conrad’s manner to me was in *that style*. Alice asked me to dine with her one day next week, when her husband would be out of town. I happened to glance in an opposite mirror, and caught a look of Conrad’s, which I knew well of old; it is a look he has when a proposition is made which he dislikes. I refused on the plea of having no time; Alice easily accepted it, and soon after I took my leave, and came away depressed in heart. Alice herself cannot vex or alienate me, but I can see that our intercourse will cease. I know how easily she is influenced by those around her. I know so well the mischief and danger of her position, and I know, too, that I should be a good companion for her.

“ You will wonder why I plague you with a long history about a woman whom you never saw, and who would not interest you if you had. Alice is my HALF SISTER: her father was my father also, but I am illegitimate, and never knew him; he had abandoned my mother and become a respectable man before I saw the light. Alice is ignorant of this. I was careful not to tell her when I was a poor, unknown, almost starving girl; for I saw then (in spite of my affection and gratitude for her) her extreme timidity, and the utter absence



of all moral courage in her character. Her conscientiousness would have made her desire to treat me as a sister, and her horror of all blame or scandal would have taken away all comfort from the relationship. I determined that I would keep silence until I had made for myself such a position in the world as would prevent my being considered a disgrace to a respectable connexion. I did not even tell Conrad of this relationship; I had hoped that during this visit I might have made myself known to her, and claimed her for my sister. I cannot tell you how full of love my heart is towards her. Now I see that it can never be; it is another illusion gone, another hope passed away in unripe blessedness;—let it go, I yield it up; no sin of my own has made me an outcast, and I have done all that lies in me for the atonement of the error that first caused it. I speak to you calmly, but I have shed bitter tears; it seemed to me such an innocent desire, one that I might have knelt down and begged God to grant. I have succeeded in my ambition; but all by which I had hoped to sanctify that ambition, to give to it value and sweetness, has been thwarted, and what good shall my life now do me? Dear friend, dear friend, do not think me ungrateful to you, nor unmindful of all you have done for me; but I am traversing a path where all my pleasant things have been laid waste. I have no heart left to form new hopes. I am contented that things should be as they are. I would not desire to change them now that I see their nature. I can say no more than this,—I must sit desolate for a

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while, and then perhaps I shall gain strength to go on less wearily. But why should I plague you with all this, except that you are my friend, that you are patient with me and love me, and are better to me than I deserve.

“ Your faithful friend and sister,

“ BIANCA.”

CHAPTER IX.

"MY dear Bryant," cried Alice, as soon as they were seated at dinner (the day of Bianca's visit), "I had quite an adventure this morning. Who do you think has been here?"

"Perhaps the Emperor of China? if you insist upon my guessing; but I think you had better tell me, instead of driving me pitilessly out into the wilds of conjecture—WHO has been here? I ask you with an emphasis that would touch the heart of a sphinx!"

"Well then," replied Alice, "as I am made of 'penetrable stuff,' I will tell you; but I do not promise that you shall consider it a 'pleasing fact.' Bianca, the celebrated actress, has been to see me! I little dreamed when she was my protégée years ago, that she would come to be a woman of distinction. She was looking extremely well, and much handsomer than formerly; she came in her carriage, and was dressed beautifully. She said she took advantage of being in the neighbourhood, to call and thank me for my past kindness to her."

Bryant looked rather grave. "That is all very well for once, my dear: it might be very grateful and all that, to call and show you that she had prospered in the world, and to let you see that she had a carriage of her own; but now that both those objects are attained, I do not wish you to renew your acquaintance with her. I should much more dislike your knowing her now that she is become a noted person, than when she was struggling in obscurity. Professional people live in a world of their own; and it is very undesirable that they should be introduced into the private circles of the middle classes: it tends to destroy that sobriety and balance of conduct which makes their peculiar virtue, without introducing at the same time the abilities, and powers of pleasing, which are the redeeming qualities of the other class. I have a singular objection to meeting with authors, actors, artists, or professional people of any sort; except in the peculiar exercise of their vocation, which I am willing to pay for. There may be respectable people amongst them, but they are not sufficient to give a colouring to the class; and as a class, there is a want of stamina about them: they have no precision or business-like habits, the absence of which leaves an opening for faults with very ugly names; and persons whose profession it is to amuse others, and make themselves pleasing, cannot in the nature of things expect to take a very high position. Men cannot feel reverence or respect for those who aspire to amuse them."

"Well!" cried Conrad, laughing, "I have always

observed that heavy, sententious, stupid persons, seem to entertain a species of contempt for those who possess the lighter gifts of being entertaining; but I never heard it made into a theory before. To leave that part of the question, however, let me ask you, whether you consider that the province of those who profess the fine arts, is only to amuse? Do you think that they have gained the real end of their labour when they are paid for what they do? and do you consider the production of works of art to be a mere mode of earning a living?"

"This is an industrial country," said Bryant; "the great mass of sympathy and intellect takes a practical direction—a direction that we understand; we have no real knowledge of art, no real instinct or genuine aspiration after it; and I should say, that in our hearts we do not respect, love, or honour fine art in any of its manifestations, as we do that which is scientific or practical. To the Italians, to the French even, music and pictures are necessities of life; to us English, they only take the guise of ornament, or convenience—of superfluity, in short. That being the case, we naturally do not feel drawn to the society of artists; we have nothing in common with them—we do not admire them; neither do we feel disposed to introduce to the society of our wives and daughters, a parcel of actors, artists, musicians, and so forth, who have no stake in society, who have little to lose, whose capital is all invested in themselves and their two hands, and who have, therefore, naturally cultivated themselves far beyond what we practical men have had a chance of doing, and

are capable of throwing us into the shade in our own houses, whilst they show that they despise us. Let them keep their places, and let us keep ours!"

"But do you allow nothing for the civilising influence of men of cultivated intellect amongst you?" said Conrad.

"Railroads will do more," replied Bryant; "every people must work out its civilisation in its own way. Love of the fine arts is *not* our speciality,—we do not know a good thing from a bad one, unless we are told; and the pretence we make about it has a bad effect on our character. There is such a pressure of competition, and so much enterprise in all departments of industry, that all the energies of English people are absorbed and worked out in that direction. Show a man of mechanical genius, in the manufacturing classes, the finest statue that ever was made—his first question will be, 'Was it made by hand?' and his next thought would be, to invent a MACHINE, to produce something like it by a mechanical process; he would see nothing in it which might not be obtained by a machine."

"Perhaps," said Conrad, "that may explain how, whilst the *results* produced by the energies of the commercial classes seem stupendous, like the works of demigods, the people themselves are absolutely unendurable—they are, in general, real barbarians, savage men."

"What would you have?" said Bryant, shrugging his shoulders; "they do the work of the world, and real labour was never yet made to look beautiful; we are engaged all day at the full stretch with our nerves,

sinews, brains, strained to the utmost tension; and do you think we have either strength or time to spend in trying to move along gracefully? We, who have to grapple with realities, grow stern and rude as the elements in which we work; we have to produce the substance out of which refinement, civilisation, the very country itself, have to come forth. It is not our fault if the fine arts, and the artists who produce them, seem small and trivial beside the immense interests with which we have to deal, and the materials with which we have to work."

"But," said Conrad, "do you not think that this movement for the encouragement of art and diffusion of universal taste, will have a softening and fertilising influence on the rudeness of the industrial classes in this country?"

"It will be only an acquired taste," replied Bryant; "but, perhaps, like our hot-house fruit, it may have a finer flavour than in the countries where it is indigenous. It is not a movement in which I take the least interest myself,—but whatever is genuine in it will go on,—and all the talking in the world will not keep the rest alive. We shall see what comes of it in the end; but in the mean time, I have remained here talking a great deal too long. So good bye to you both. What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"Mrs. Bryant talked of taking me to a party," said Conrad.

"Ah! that will be well. You had better take the carriage. If I can, I will join you in the evening;"

and, with a nod to Alice and Conrad, Bryant left the room.

"I have promised to take Mrs. Lathom some ferns; she has none, will you come with me to the conservatory to cut them?" said Alice.

Conrad did not need asking twice; he rose with alacrity, and joyfully followed her.

"Do you," said he, as they walked along, "share in Bryant's indifference to the fine arts? I should say not; every thing around you announces a cultivated taste."

"Ah!" said Alice, "I inherit from my father a passionate love for pictures; he had a fine collection, but they were all dispersed when he died, and I have felt as if I had been all my life banished from my natural home, and forced to live in a strange place where I could not feel *at home*. I was very young when those pictures were sent away; there were some statues and busts, too; and yet I remember them so well. I dream of them at night; and whenever I hear of heaven, I instinctively think of my father's house full of pictures and beautiful objects, and hope to be restored to it. I have tried to paint, myself; but though my whole heart seems melting with a love for an idea of some ineffable picture I never saw, yet I have no control of hand, and what I have produced are such blurred and patched daubs, that I have given up the practice. You see I am surrounded with every thing that a woman can desire, and yet I feel shut up in prison; I can get to hear and see nothing that my heart cares for. I

hardly know what it is that I do thirst to hear and see: I say pictures, because these are the only things that ever expressed to me what I feel I need; but there are many other things besides them; it is not the actual pictures that I desire, but what they seem to mean and utter that I want to hear. If I might travel, I should find it; but Bryant cannot leave home, except on hurried business-journeys, and cannot take me with him; so I only go to the sea-side in summer. The sea makes me happy, when I can go by myself, away from every body, and look into the clouds after the sun has set. What I want to see and know so much, seems then within my reach."

"'Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,'"

said Conrad, half to himself, as he listened eagerly to all she said.

"Ah! where does that come from?" said Alice, turning quickly to him.

"Do you not know the poem?" said Conrad. "I will read it to you when we go in. I have that volume of Wordsworth in my portmanteau; have you never read him?"

"No," replied Alice.

"Well, I am almost grateful to you," replied Conrad, "for now I shall have the great pleasure of showing you for the first time two poems that have a mysterious influence upon me, and stir my soul to its foundations as no other words ever did. They work on me like a spell; if they take the same hold upon you, there will be a bond between us beyond relationship; they never fade;

their effect now is as strong as when I read them first a thousand times ago."

"I will not be an instant in cutting the ferns," said Alice, "and then we will go back and hear them before we set off. Is not that branch of fern a miracle of beauty and grace? to me ferns always seem to have a supernatural look."

"Will you give me one?" said Conrad.

"What would you do with it?" asked Alice. "You could not carry it to London with you, and I cannot find in my heart to let it get broken and die. I could almost as soon let a young child come to harm; no, no, let the poor things stay here in their appointed home: but you may carry these, and take care you do not break them; and now let us go back to the house, I am impatient to hear these poems."

As soon as they returned, Conrad fetched the volume containing "Lines on Revisiting Tintern Abbey," and Alice seated herself at her embroidery by the window. Conrad had a finely-toned voice, and he had the gift of reading remarkably well, but they were qualities quite lost on Alice at the present moment, so entirely was she penetrated by the poem; it was as if the voice of the heart of nature had syllabled itself, and made her own yearnings articulate. She sat with her face concealed from Conrad; tears, in which no pain mingled, coursed each other down her cheeks, and were the only utterance of the feelings that had been roused.

"Now," said he, after a pause, "let me read you the other poem I mentioned, the 'Ode on Immortality.'"

"No, not now; I could hear nothing that would break the impression of the other; and, besides, the carriage will be here immediately."

She rose and left the room. Conrad was half dissatisfied at her manner, which he thought betokened too much indifference.

"How could she go on with her worsted work, when she was listening to such words of inspiration!" thought he, moving almost unconsciously to the frame where she had been seated. Bending over her work, he saw that it was quite wetted with her tears, which shone like dew-drops on the half-finished flowers.

"Ah!" cried he, with enthusiasm, "how beautiful she is in all things!—with what exquisite modesty she concealed her emotion—how infinitely more touching is the general coldness of her manner, than all the passionate sensibility of other women! Bianca would not have shrunk from letting me see her tears, and she would have told me all she felt; I should never have had the delight of surprising her thoughts thus!"

He pressed his lips with enthusiasm on the embroidery: in which act he was almost surprised by Alice, as she opened the door, looking as lady-like and calm as if no emotion had ever ruffled her fair brow, or soft, star-like eyes. Conrad thought her exquisite, and she was dressed, too, exactly according to his taste. She wore a white chip bonnet, of a shape that suited the style of her face; the Cashmere shawl he remembered of old over a dress of delicate rich-coloured silk.

"Are you quite ready?" said she, smiling; "the

carriage is come round, and we are rather late, but we shall have a lovely drive."

He assisted her into the carriage, and seated himself opposite to her. For some time they neither of them spoke. He was watching her, without seeming to look at her, and she was still filled with the thoughts awakened by the poem.

"I owe you so much more than I can ever express," said she, at last. "Will you lend me that book?—or, what will be better, will you, when you go back to town, get me all his poems?—they will be like a new life to me."

"I am surprised you never met with them before," said Conrad.

"We have no library worth any thing in this neighbourhood; and I know so little, that I cannot direct my own reading. I wish you would tell me some more books to get; I feel that I waste my time sadly, and I do not know what to do."

"Would you not find it worth while to subscribe to some good London library, and have the books sent down to you?"

"Bryant would think it waste of money," said Alice. "We have a Book Society; but no books are ordered in that I care to read."

"You have a great deal of time to yourself," said Conrad. "In what do you employ yourself all day?"

"I hardly know," replied Alice. "I have nothing to do that seems worth doing. I am depressed under a

constant sense of waste, a vague consciousness that I am always doing wrong, and yet I can find out nothing that I ought to do. I need some one to direct me and guide me. Bryant is all day at his business, and is so engrossed in it, that I have scarcely any of his company, and he wants to rest when he is at home. I used to think that I should be so happy, if I might have all my time to improve myself, and spend as I like; but now that I have it, I do not know what to do with it. My whole life is one cloud, and I have a sense of responsibility which I can neither adequately discharge, nor deliver myself from. I have nothing to look forward to. When I get up in the morning, I know all that is likely to happen before night; one day is like another, and the weight of life that lies upon me is intolerable. If I had children, it would be different, I should have something to live for; as it is, I am of use to nobody. I did not like saying so at dinner time, it would have looked like contradicting Bryant; but the only companion I ever felt really to get good from was Bianca;—she was with me a little while some years ago, and she seemed to know so well all I needed, and said such wise things, without seeming to think them wise, that I felt stronger and better whilst she was with me, than I ever did before;—but you heard the objection Bryant expressed to her. I dare not ask him to let me see her again.”

“Believe me,” said Conrad, gently, “she is not the kind of companion you ought to have. Bianca is a wonderful woman, but she is in a position that must, of necessity, demoralise the essence of all that is feminine

and womanly in her nature;—she is too coarse, too strong, too passionate—you could not feel any real sympathy with her; and when a woman has once dwelt beneath the brazen glare of popularity, her beauty and value as a woman is destroyed, and the intrinsic worth of what she does to compensate for it, is more than doubtful. I should grieve much to see you disturbing the pure, gentle current of your life, by admitting a woman like Bianca into your privacy.”

“Do you know much of her of late?” asked Alice.

“A great deal,” replied Conrad, gravely. “Do you remember the mad passion I conceived for her when I came here for the first time years ago?—it ended in an engagement, which was still subsisting when I was here last. After I had seen you, I felt that Bianca was not a woman with whom I could spend my life; and I broke off the engagement irrevocably. You have far higher qualities as a woman than Bianca, with all her brilliancy. I feel myself a purer and a better man since I have known you; and you have raised the whole sex in my eyes, since in you, I have seen realised the qualities I dreamed of as most excellent in woman.” Conrad uttered this in a calm, firm, almost austere manner, which took away all tinge of flattery or gallantry.

Any further conversation was, however, prevented by their arrival at “Fairy Hill,” the residence of Mrs. Lathom.

Mrs. Lathom set up to be a “superior woman.” Conrad had hardly patience to endure the supercilious

coldness and pretentiousness of her manner, which she considered the extreme of all that was elegant. He was indignant at the tone of deep-seated superiority she assumed towards Alice; to Conrad himself, she intended to be very gracious; but it was like the atmosphere of a state drawing-room in November, with its fire not thoroughly lighted. A few friends had been assembled to meet him; but they sat stiff and silent on the superb gilded chairs. There was not sufficient geniality to animate the dead weight of elegant upholstery that filled the whole room. It stood in all the hard unassimilated individuality of its native warehouse, and seemed as if it never would feel itself at home. Every thing in the room—the pier-glasses, the marble slabs, the marqueterie tables with their gilded feet, the sumptuous carpet, the satin curtains, the gold paper and gilded ceiling—all impressed on the beholder an unmitigated sense of wasted money: there was no geniality to make it forgotten.

A solemn whist-table in one corner, a few books of engravings in miraculously splendid bindings, and a few faintly warbled songs from one or two young ladies, were the only aids the victims found to pass through the dreary evening. What conversation there was, passed in a low tone between neighbours; all that Conrad could hear was of the most bald, insipid description. To Conrad, fresh from London society, and the conversational fire-works flashing about there, it seemed marvellous how human beings could exist in such a stagnant region; and yet all the people, taken indivi-

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dually, were sensible, educated persons, only they did not possess the art of being sociable.

Conrad sat down to whist and lost a few sovereigns whilst sighing for eleven o'clock. A sumptuous supper at length seemed to rouse the guests into something like vitality. Mr. Lathom handed a portly-looking lady in black velvet and point lace to the seat beside him, at the bottom of the table; and a stout, grave, pale gentleman in spectacles, seated himself beside Mrs. Lathom at the top; every one else found their place as they could. Conrad got beside Alice, and sat down much astonished at the profusion of every thing he saw before him; but when people have dined early, and have been bored without intermission for a long evening, a good supper is not a disagreeable diversion, and Conrad, though he denounced it as a barbarism, found himself submitting to it with much complacency. Bryant came in just as they were sitting down. There was a little talk at supper, but it was exclusively either political or commercial, and very uninteresting to Conrad, who could take no part in it.

"Is this the average of your society?" said he, in a low voice, to Alice.

"As far as amusement goes, yes," replied Alice; "but some of the gentlemen are very clever, and very agreeable when you can talk to them, but it is not the fashion here to talk much to women; they naturally have more to say to each other, being all in business together."

"And the women?" said Conrad.

"Oh, that one sitting beside Mr. Lathom is a very

nice woman, very kind-hearted and genial; but I am not intimate with any of them; they think so much of being 'select' in their society, but I would be very thankful for somebody nice, no matter what set they were in. How different Bianca looked to all the women here!"

"That is not a fair comparison," said he; "Bianca has cultivated all her personal gifts and graces to the utmost; it is her profession; but she would not have had the grace to spend a long, stupid evening patiently as you have done, and yet you are qualified to mingle in any set, however intellectual or refined."

"What a luxury it must be," cried Alice, "to have the *entrée* to London society, to meet really clever people, and hear witty speeches, and things worth listening to!"

"Every patch of ground looks greener than the one we stand upon," said Conrad, laughing. "I am going back to London to-morrow, and yet I consider those who have the privilege of coming to see you whenever they like are much more to be envied than I am!—But are we never going away? I long to be home in your drawing-room, to rest my eyes after all the gilding they have seen to-night; I have been trying to calculate how many sovereigns must have been melted down to cover that room!—people should in decency disguise their money a little. But do let us go. Bryant wants a cigar, I can see."

Alice rose; her example was followed by the rest, and the company dispersed generally.

CHAPTER X.

IF people only would believe it, wishing is just the most insanely dangerous pastime a rational being can indulge in ! forethought, plans, schemes, are generally in the end, however successful they may seem, nothing more than elaborate folly, in which it would have been much happier for the parties had they been disappointed. Good King David, the father of a wise son, and himself a very politic man in his way, used to say emphatically : “ In vain do they rise up early, and late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness ; ”—and the sailor-song says quaintly enough—

“ For Providence will have its way,
Let men do as they will ! ”

Men would have fewer troubles, if they took less pains to bring them upon themselves. Their greatest plagues generally result from their success in some scheme on which they have specially set their heart.

All this moralising is *à propos* to something that Bryant considered, at the time, a great stroke of good fortune.

The night after they returned from the party at Mrs. Lathom's, and the gentlemen were smoking their cigars together after Alice had retired, Conrad, who did not too well know what to talk about, negligently asked Bryant, what he thought would be a good investment for a few thousand pounds. He had not thought of the subject the moment before. Bryant caught at the suggestion; it would suit his schemes just then remarkably well to have a little additional advanced; and if he could induce Conrad to connect himself as a sleeping partner with his house, it would be a good thing for him, and not a bad one for Conrad, as he considered the result secure. He began to sound Conrad on the subject. Conrad, who would cheerfully have risked, not a part of his fortune alone, but the whole of it, for a chance of getting a hold on the family, listened eagerly to the proposal, and departed the next morning, promising to think of it,—and fully resolved to close with any terms, thinking thereby that he would be able to see Alice again and again. Bryant, Conrad, and Alice, when they heard of it, all fancied in their hearts that they must have been wearing “a wishing cap,” so extremely propitious did the plan appear. The realisation of it seemed to progress equally well; the details, all arranging themselves, had fitted into each other without any drawback or hindrance; it rose like the building of Solomon's temple, in which no noise of workmen or hammers was heard. Really, if men did but know

it, the desire of their own hearts ought to make them afraid!

Conrad came down again in a fortnight. He had shaved off his moustaches—they looked a phenomenon in the circle where he wished to be domesticated, and he was anxious to get rid of every thing incongruous, and to look as much as possible like an English man of business. It was settled that he was to remain a few weeks with the Bryants, to get some knowledge of affairs, whilst the details of the partnership were arranged. In the course of these few weeks a great deal that no one thought of went on below the quiet, dreamy, prosaic surface of their every-day life.

Bryant took a real affection for Conrad; thought him an upright, intelligent, generous fellow, with great talents for business, if they were cultivated. Alice was not aware of the hold Conrad was gaining over her; her whole life was brightened up; she became sensible of thoughts and energies which had never stirred in her before. She employed herself with a zeal and interest she had never before felt in any of her occupations. It had become a matter of course to look to Conrad as a companion, to turn to him instinctively for counsel and approbation in all she did. His taste, his opinions, moulded hers. He directed her reading, he read to her, and all she did or said found a gentle echo in him. She had never been so happy in her life. Nor had she ever been so charming. She seemed, for the first time, to be placed in a congenial atmosphere, and all her

graces and virtues expanded in its kindly warmth. To Bryant, Alice was gentle and loving as ever. His coldness and distraction did not annoy her now. She did not feel them ; her own happy cheerfulness was diffused, like a sunny light, on all within her influence.

Conrad's love and veneration for Alice knew no bounds ; every day increased her empire over him ; the more he loved her, the more carefully he buried it within his most secret heart. To live in the light of her looks, to be near her, to hear her speak, was all he asked. He would not have sullied the gentle purity of her soul by a word that an angel might not have heard, nor have startled her by a tone or look of passion. He loved her with every fibre of his nature. All the best and purest feelings of his soul were called forth. Every baser passion seemed subdued and purified. For the time, he felt satisfied and content to add to the comfort of her daily existence, and asked no return ; wished for nothing, except to remain near her, and watch over her, like a guardian angel. He could not feel any sense of guilt, for he had never been sensible before of so many generous and noble impulses. He really loved her, and love ennobles all it touches. "It makes the reptile equal to the god." So things went on. "But all this world contains holds in perfection but a little moment." Excellency cannot be stereotyped—it must be maintained by the struggle and strong grasp of life alone. Left to itself it loses its shape and glorious beauty, and fades and falls away into corruption and dissolution.

There was to be a grand dinner-party. Conrad had been talking of going back to town, but he remained for it. He had begun to think that he ought to go—that he could not live there all his life ; that he must go away ; for this thought alone had disturbed the blessed tranquillity in which he had been so long dwelling. But it was settled he was to remain till after the dinner-party. It was the morning of the day: Alice was arranging flowers, and busying herself in putting out her drawing-room ornaments, and arranging the room as it was to be. She moved about in her delicate-coloured morning dress like a gentle Naiad. Conrad was lying on one of the sofas, pretending to read; but, in reality, watching her as she flitted gracefully to and fro. She arranged her lamps, put out her best cushions, and filled a large alabaster basket with flowers. She was very much absorbed in her employment, and did not perceive the intense expression of Conrad's eyes.

"You perceive I have followed your taste in the lamp—I took the one you admired. Now come here and tell me how you like the effect of the room; I think it is very pretty as you look through those folding-doors."

"You do all things well!" said Conrad, with involuntary energy.

Then, confused at his own warmth, he walked into the inner room, and pretended to be altering the position of the lamp; but he scarcely knew what he was about, and lifting it awkwardly, the heavy lamp over-

balanced in his hands and fell to the ground with a terrible crash.

"What is it?" cried Alice, running in dismay at the sound. "My beautiful new lamp! and the oil is all over the carpet!" She began hastily to pick up the broken glass, but put her hand down heedlessly on a large jagged piece, which cut it severely. She uttered a slight shriek at the pain, and Conrad in great agitation lifted her upon a sofa, for she had turned sick and pale at the sight of the blood. Conrad examined her hand and pressed it to his lips; it seemed to him like sacrilege to let any of the precious drops be lost.

"Give me some water," said Alice, faintly. He threw out the flowers she had so carefully arranged, and brought the vase to her; she drank a little, and he sprinkled her face and neck.

"It is nothing; I shall be better soon—do not be frightened."

"Oh, Alice! you are hurt—you are dreadfully hurt, and all through my fault," cried Conrad, in despair. He washed the wound and bound it skilfully up: the perspiration stood on his forehead, and his face was as pale as the handkerchief with which he had staunched the wound. When he had finished, he shuddered and buried his head in the sofa pillow beside her.

"Poor dear Conrad, how I have frightened you," said Alice; but Conrad did not speak; he seemed under the influence of violent emotion beyond his control, and the couch shook with the sobs that burst from his bosom.

“Conrad, Conrad!” said Alice, wildly, “tell me what is the matter. Are you hurt?—are you ill?” and she attempted to lift his head with her soft white hand. Conrad started at her touch and looked up. She was terrified at the expression of his countenance; his lips were still marked with blood, traces of tears were on his cheeks, and his eyes were pale and almost extinct.

“Speak to me, Conrad—one word—tell me what has come to you that you look thus?”

“I love you, Alice!” said he, in a low hard whisper; and with a look of passion and despair, such as no woman could misinterpret, he rose and left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

IN spite of all the occurrences of the morning, the dinner-party came to pass at its appointed time. Alice was standing in the drawing-room, ready to receive her guests, looking a little paler than usual—but that might arise from her accident, for her hand was very painful; the bandage was covered with black ribbon, and she was obliged to rest it in a sling. The carpet showed evident tokens of the misadventure, and it was quite a topic of conversation for the time before dinner.

“Lamps are a great source of anxiety,” said one lady, pathetically. “I have been tormented to death with them; they always took the opportunity of either falling down, or going out, or beginning to smoke, when I had company, though they burned beautifully at other times; they might have known and done it on purpose. But now I keep a footman to attend expressly to them, and I take no anxiety about them. If any thing goes wrong, it is a comfort to have somebody to blame for it.”

Others recited their various plagues and experiences:

it seemed a universal ground of sympathy. Conrad did not make his appearance until just as dinner was announced. Alice felt him come in, although she did not look towards him. He kept at the opposite end of the room; but in the general movement of sitting down to table, he found himself placed nearly close beside her, divided from her only by his companion and her right-hand neighbour, who had brought her in to dinner. She was dressed in black velvet high to the throat, without any ornament except a pair of pearl bracelets, her husband's gift when they were married, and which she had put on as a sort of talisman this day. So much in this world goes on from habit, goes on because it has been once set going. Alice sat at the head of her table, went through all the customary duties of her place, spoke and answered, mechanically, words of course, and yet she was conscious of nothing that was going on; none of the company, with *one* exception, saw any thing peculiar in her manner; she was very quiet and silent—but seldom spoke. She never looked towards Conrad, and he once only addressed her to say—"May I give you some wine?"

She took it, but did not raise her eyes beneath the one glance he turned upon her. The evening passed over like most other evenings after a well-conducted dinner-party, where the guests are all highly respectable, but by no means stimulating company. There was coffee handed round to the ladies, and after coffee they had a little music. Some of the dowagers held a privy council of gossip amongst themselves; while the younger ladies sat

about and looked at books and engravings, and were harmlessly *ennuyé*, until the gentlemen re-appeared, which they did just as it was time to depart. The carriages were announced, the owners entered them, and were driven away, and the whole affair was at an end.

As soon as the last guest had departed, Bryant ordered candles to his private-business room, desiring his wife not to sit up for him, as he had his evening letters to read, and should probably be up late. Alice was once more alone, sitting on the couch in the inner drawing-room. What she was thinking about it would be hard to say; she did not know it herself; she was stunned with the declaration and the occurrences of the morning. How long she had remained sitting there she knew not, when she was roused by Conrad, who entered, looking pale, miserable, and desperate.

"Alice!" said he, "Alice, you must let me speak to you for five minutes, now all those dreadful people are gone. It is the last time. I am going away to-morrow, and I cannot leave you thus. Come up stairs to your own sitting-room; we shall be interrupted here; you must hear what I have to say. Alice, do not make me desperate, do not make me more wretched than I am. I thought this evening would be eternal. For pity's sake do not hesitate:—what have I done to deserve that you should not trust me? Alice! you must hear me, you shall hear me, I demand it as a right: I have that to say which you must listen to, and I cannot speak here."

The servants were, in fact, beginning to extinguish

the lights ; Alice feared his agitated manner would attract their notice.

“ What have you to say ? ” said she, hurriedly. “ For God’s sake, consider what you are about ; you will be seen—you will be heard—go away now.”

“ Will you let me see you alone for five minutes, in your own sitting-room ? Alice ! I am desperate, I am capable of any extravagance ; do not drive me beside myself ; you *must* hear me. I deserve better at your hands than this.”

Alice trembled violently, and half made a gesture to rise, and then drew back. The servant entered the room where they were together.

“ Mrs. Bryant,” said Conrad, in a formal tone, “ will you look out the drawing you promised to give me ; I go away so early to-morrow there will be no time then.”

To escape the eyes of the servant, Alice rose. At the door of her sitting-room she stood for a moment irresolute, but women of her character have an instinct to do whatever seems decidedly expected from them. She went in and stood beside the fire-place, almost insensible from agitation. Conrad had lost all his power of utterance. He leaned against the mantel-piece, not daring to raise his eyes to her. The emotion of each rose to a point of agony.

“ Alice ! ” said Conrad, in a choking voice, “ I wished to ask—I could not go away without—Alice ! ” cried he, impetuously, all the pent-up passion of his soul finding its way like a lava torrent ; “ Alice ! I love you—my

whole soul is yours. I have no life but you. You are my god—my religion—my life. I love you. Do not send me away from you; my whole soul is devoted to you. I have lived in your shadow—in the sound of your dear voice; you have been like a blessed angel to me; all I know of goodness or purity is from you. Alice, I love you. Do not send me away from you, I cannot go—I will not go—I must stay beside you. There is no world—no life—no place but in your presence. Alice, Alice, tell me not to go away, let me stay—let me live as your slave, I will never speak one word to you that a blessed angel might not hear. I ask nothing—I desire nothing, only let me stay—let me be under the same roof with you. I have controlled myself—I intended to go away in silence, but I have no power to go, the torture has forced me to utterance; let me stay and I will be dumb. Alice, Alice, be merciful. Ever since I saw you I have loved you, and have I not been silent? It was to be near you, to have the right of approaching you, that I embarked with Bryant. I ask nothing but to remain beside you: once living in your dear presence, I cannot leave it; why must I go away? Why are you banishing me? I am mad, and you have driven me mad. My whole life centres in you. I will not go away; let me stay, and I will never offend you more. I thought to fly to save myself from perdition, but I am lost, I am lost, let me stay!" He uttered this frantic appeal with a rapidity and energy that made it almost inarticulate.

"Conrad! Conrad!" said Alice, "what words are these? For pity's sake hush, I must not hear them.

You must go. You will not be so wretched long. We are both very wrong. Go; you must go, and not return. Oh, why did you ever come!" cried she, in an accent of despair.

"Alice, it is the only life I have ever known; this last month, this last precious month, would have been cheaply bought with an eternity of pain. If I had not loved you, I should not have known life;—it has been the only thing I ever did that was worth coming into the world for. I love you; I will pay the penalty, if it be death or madness. Oh, I rejoice in suffering for you. I ask no return from you; I ask only not to be driven from your presence."

Alice had never witnessed strong passionate emotion. All her life her soul had been athirst for words of love; all the words he uttered found an echo in her own soul; and she was obliged to put aside the cup that was offered, for the first time, to her parched soul in the dreary desert of her life. She leaned her forehead against the mantel-piece, and, without trusting herself to look at Conrad, she said, in a low but steady tone, "You must go; there is no more peace or safety for us together. So long as I did not know your secret I was guiltless. God knows, I never suspected it till this morning; we have been so calm, so happy; but that is all past now, and will never return. Do not attempt to come back again; we can never be again as we have been; it is idle to dream of it. You will find again the peace of mind you have lost. My life was dreary before you came, and when you are gone,"—

her voice failed, but she recovered herself, and continued abruptly, "It is a forbidden thing for us to be happy as we have been, and we must both pay the price of having learned what we ought never to have known. I cannot innocently see you again. I must not remain here; let me go."

He seized one of her hands as she turned away, and flinging himself on the ground, clasped her knees: "Alice! Alice!" cried he, wildly, "do you know the meaning of 'for ever?' God alone has the right to condemn to a 'for ever.' You know not what you are saying. Tell me I am not to return for a month—for a year—for two years,—but fix some term when I may come back to look on you."

"Conrad! Conrad!" cried Alice, in despair, "do not break my heart! It is you who should strengthen me; you must have strength for both. Do I look as if it made me happy to send you away for ever?—to know that we must never see each other again? Do not lead me into wrong: let me go; I must go; I will go."

Disengaging her hand, and without daring to look at him she left that room. Conrad remained in the same spot, prostrate on the ground, unable to tear himself away from where he had last seen her. The candle had long since burned out, and the cold gray morning began to break the darkness. He madly kissed the ground where she had stood, and staggered to his bed-room, where, exhausted, he flung himself on the bed.

He had arranged to depart early, and was in hopes he should escape without seeing Bryant; who, however, was already in the breakfast-room, where the shutters had just been opened and a hasty breakfast set out, when Conrad descended.

"Conrad, my boy! I did not see you last night. Alice could not get up to see you, she is very ill. I sat up late writing letters last night, and when I went up stairs at a little after two o'clock this morning I found her lying on the couch in her dressing-room. She has been having shivering-fits and fainting away the whole night. I shall go with you to the coach, and then bring home the doctor to see her, for I am very uneasy about her."

Fortunately, Bryant was too much engaged to notice Conrad's haggard and disturbed countenance, or to perceive the agitation into which the mention of Alice threw him. Nevertheless, to hear of her suffering was the only consolation of which he was just then susceptible. He felt a secret joy at knowing that he did not suffer alone.

"Now, my boy, we have not a moment to lose," cried Bryant, rising and swallowing his cup of tea; "the coach starts at a quarter to six." Casting one look at the desolate room, Conrad followed him.

CHAPTER XII.

AT first Alice felt Conrad's absence a relief,—he loved her, he had told her so, and she was satisfied. The deep thirst of her heart was appeased, she felt it was well for both he should be away. Then began the deep vacuity of absence; that weight, “heavy as lead, and deep almost as life:” it enveloped her and her whole existence as with a cloud of thick darkness,—“darkness that might be felt.” She shut herself up in the house—refused to see any one, refused to go out. She could not bear to look on any object associated with him. When she walked in the garden, the very trees seemed to nod their heads, and mock her dumb agony. She sat nearly always in the inner drawing-room. Sometimes she tried to continue the ottoman she had worked on when he was there, and forced herself to take a few stitches; then, flinging down the frame, as a pang of memory shot through her mind, she would fall back in a fit of vehement hysterical weeping, which increased upon her every day, till her health became seriously affected. At other times she would go to a small book-case, and

taking down the Wordsworth he had given to her, sit looking at it without reading, wildly pressing her lips to a mark on one of the pages. Sometimes she would make a desperate struggle to free herself. She determined to crush this passion out of her heart; and once actually began to destroy the presents he had given her from time to time, the box of paints, a little Swiss basket, and the rest. But such a host of memories came with each—the kind words, the pleasant occasions on which they had been presented—times, before she had eaten of the tree of knowledge, when she was calm, happy, ignorant of passion—that her courage failed her. Hastily snatching the little carved basket from the flames, she took all her treasures and hid them in the secret drawer of a cabinet, in the inner drawing-room, firmly resolving that she would never visit them, or look upon them again; and that same night, after she had retired to rest, came down stairs, to be sure that no one had meddled with them! She struggled, helplessly, under a weight that seemed glued to her very soul. A sense of remorse pursued her like a fiend—every kind word uttered by her husband went to her heart—a thousand times she was on the point of telling him every thing—the pent-up agony of her soul was more than she could bear—the feeling of her duplicity was, perhaps, after all, the most intolerable of her sufferings. She longed to tell her husband, in order that, at least, she might stand true in his eyes; but then she feared to compromise Conrad; she hesitated, and, after all, it was but one emotion out of the thousand that tore her

soul. Her health failed, her temper failed ; it became unequal, passionate, morose. She was in misery ; misery that no words could express ; and, at times, she was near suicide, as the only escape from her intolerable suffering.

Bryant was, at that time, a great deal from home, or he must have suspected some cause for this extraordinary change. He saw she was dull, and out of spirits. He pressed her to invite some friend—she pettishly refused. He proposed she should go from home, with his sister, for change of scene—she sullenly refused to stir. When he spoke affectionately, she repulsed him. He could not account for the change that had come over her, and at length quietly bore it ; hoping that, in time, she would recover her equanimity. She was touched by her husband's patient forbearance, and made many efforts to be more amiable towards him ; but she was in misery, and when she thought that she was never to see Conrad more, she was in a frenzy of grief, that drove, for the time, all the better movements from her heart.

A strong emotion—a real feeling of any kind, is a truth ; no matter whether it be compatible or not with received maxims of right and wrong.

A married woman, in love with a man not her husband, is a fact worthy of all reprobation—worthy of the anathemas which are deserved, by either men or women, who have taken on themselves engagements, and fail in the fulfilment of it. Still, when all the anathemas have been expended, the fact remains

the same ; she is under the dominion of a real feeling, deep as life, and overpowering as death. It is a fact, and requires to be exorcised by something as deep, strong, and vital, as itself. It will not stir for being called hard names, it does not recognise them ; it stands on its own affinity with reality ; otherwise, it could not hold its place against the torrent of shame, fear, remorse, and all kinds of confusion, which, like a wild deluge, sweeps over the soul it hath entered, driving before it all the rules of action, principle, and thought, by which life had previously been shaped and organised. It has taken possession in right of being stronger than any thing already there ; it is proof against evil report, danger, shame, death itself, when they are denounced simply as penalties for the offence. A true woman would cheerfully risk her own salvation for the sake of him she loves. There must be an appeal to some higher motive than mere personal considerations, if a woman, once under the influence of passion, is to be brought back to a sound mind. Alice had no one to speak a word of strong counsel to her, she was left to be tossed amongst her own shifting and vacillating emotions,—to her own weak passionate heart. She had never been possessed of any real sense of the paramount reality and importance of duty. Among all the maxims she had been taught, and the vague, misty, religious doctrines she had learned, there was not one, which now, in this hour of temptation, presented itself, as appealing to the realities of things. She had a vague notion of being very bad, and very wicked, but what she was to do,

or how she ought to right herself, never occurred to her. She sat down, helpless and miserable, humbled to the dust by a sense of guilt, and yet clinging to her passion for Conrad, without even an effort to conquer it. The constant aspiration of her poor, tossed, trembling heart, was, "Oh, that I had any one to counsel me, to tell me what I ought to do." Her instinct was to tell her husband—to take up her true position with him. This instinct she did not dare to follow; she thought it would be more *prudent* to conceal it.

Things went on in this miserable, distracted manner for nearly two months, when Bryant, who had been much worried by business, had to go from home in consequence of the failure of one of his correspondents. He never was in the habit of plaguing Alice about his business anxieties; they often rendered him silent and abstracted, but never cross or harsh. Alice had been too much absorbed in her own misery to notice the deepened shadow that had come over him. He told her at breakfast one morning that business of importance required him to leave home for some days.

"Oh, do not go; you must not go," cried Alice, passionately.

"What is the meaning of all this?" said Bryant, in a surprised tone.

"Do not leave me alone," said Alice, still more vehemently; "have you not seen me ill, suffering, and you are going to leave me! You love your business more than any thing else. You care not what comes

to me. You would never miss me; you would live equally contented if I were dead: you have never loved me, and now you are leaving me alone!"

"Alice, Alice," said Bryant, sternly, "what fantastic nonsense is this? You are worse than childish; you fancy yourself ill, and you give way to your temper, till your humour becomes absolutely insupportable. You see me worried and anxious about matters of indispensable importance, and you choose this time for reproaches,—which you know are not deserved."

"Oh do not speak unkindly to me!" cried Alice, piteously; "I cannot bear it; I am ill, weak, wicked, but do not leave me; or if you must go, take me with you, do not leave me by myself."

Bryant was so accustomed of late to see Alice in violent fits of excitement, and of a most variable and uncertain humour, that he did not attach any sort of importance to this outburst of feeling. He only replied in a cold, decided tone.

"You are asking what is quite impossible. I am going on business that must be attended to, and you would be in the way. I am quite tired of these scenes, and I wish you would try to get a little more reasonable before I return."

He left the room as he said this, without any attempt to soften its severity or to console Alice.

"I should be in the way," sobbed she, as soon as she was alone, "he is quite tired of these scenes—business, business, always business—I am nothing, or

at best of secondary importance. Well, be it so, be it so; I need feel no more remorse; he has lost me by his own fault."

Bryant was to go that evening. When he returned to dinner he tried to make amends for his harshness in the morning, but Alice remained sullen and indifferent. He was fully occupied about the affair that called him from home; and after a few attempts to conquer her ill humour, he left her to recover her temper (as he considered it) at her leisure. Alice saw him depart with a strange mixture of feelings. She had no definite purpose of evil in her heart; but for the first time she began to justify herself, and to reason down her remorse. She ceased to struggle with her own thoughts, and gave in headlong to the passion that was consuming her.

The devil never fails to take advantage of every evil or weak movement, and asserts himself at every "damning opportunity." Bryant had to see Conrad in London, and to tell him of the awkward turn affairs were taking; with trembling lips Conrad asked after Alice, and learned that she had been ill and seemed out of spirits. To Conrad this revealed much; he felt that absence had befriended him; and he resolved to present himself before her, sure that he would not be repulsed.

Bryant had been gone four days, and Alice was sitting in her accustomed place in the inner drawing-room, when she heard a ring at the bell which she well recognised. It made her heart stand still. She thought they would never open the door. She feared that through some stupidity *he* would be refused on account of "Mr. Bryant not

being at home." Steps approached, the drawing-room opened, and "Mr. Conrad Percy" was announced. He did not advance till the door was closed behind him and the servant had time to retire; then trembling, and as much agitated as Alice, he stood before her.

Alice neither spoke nor moved, but a flash of gladness like sunlight passed over her face. Neither of them spoke. A passionate, guilty joy was in their hearts; they were interpenetrated with each other's presence.

"As the melting fire burneth,"

honour, conscience, every barrier that was between them was destroyed; they only felt they were together; neither regret nor doubt intruded. **THEY WERE TOGETHER.** That was the one reality into which their whole life was absorbed.

"You love me now, Alice," said Conrad, at last, in a low voice. Alice did not reply, but the hands he held grasped his.

"You will never send me away again."

"Never!" said Alice.

Conrad had a perverse sense of honour. He was deterred by no scruple from gaining the affection of his friend's wife; but when assured of his triumph, he shrank from the man on whom he had inflicted such a grievous wrong: he insisted that Alice should leave her husband's roof, and fly with him that very evening. At first, Alice refused; she had confessed her passion to him, but intended to stop there. Women always intend to stand very firm, after they have given in the first step; but the "pomp of virtue," as Mr.

Rowe calls it, did not come to her rescue. Conrad endeavoured to invest the step he was proposing with an air of uprightness. He knew that if he could make her believe that she had kept her faith with Bryant, in remaining faithful to him so long as she continued under his roof, and that in going away openly she was acting uprightly, he should be able to shield her from the reaction of remorse or regret. He knew her well enough, to be sure she would shrink from no blame or scandal, or loss of reputation, so long as she could to her own conscience throw the least varnish of rectitude over her crime ; and, besides, he really wished to conduct matters as honourably as circumstances would allow.

Alice, who believed that, in loving him, she had already committed all the sin possible, and that no redemption for her remained, at length consented to fly with him—to leave her husband's roof within an hour ! To avoid rousing the suspicions of the servants, they agreed to leave the house separately. Conrad departed to make arrangements for their flight, and was to await her at the gate in half an hour.

“ Be firm, my Alice. You will not fail me ; I trust my life, my honour, all my future in your hands ! ”

“ You need not fear for me,” said Alice, with desperate calmness. “ I know that I have lost my soul for you. I know the punishment on wives who are faithless—I know there is no pardon or remission of sin for me in this world or the next. I have lost myself for you, and would do so again a thousand times, to give you but one moment's gladness. I will not fail you.”

When Conrad was gone, Alice, like one in the stupor of drunkenness or in sleep-walking, went to her dressing-room. She made no preparation for her departure, she determined to take nothing with her—she locked her drawers and her dressing-case, which contained her jewels, and made the key into a parcel addressed to Bryant. This reminded her that she ought to write to him to explain what she had done, and she sat down to her desk and began to write, in the same state of stupefied excitement. It seemed to her as if she were transacting a dream.

Meanwhile, Bryant, by one of those coincidences that occur so often in real life, and which sound so unreal in books, had been able to return home earlier than he expected. He thought he would not write to tell Alice, but would give her a surprise. After Conrad had been gone about a quarter of an hour, he arrived. Surprised to find the hall door on the latch, he entered without ringing; and meeting one of the servants in the hall, he reproved his carelessness in leaving the door open. "Is your mistress within?" continued he.

"Yes, sir; she is in the drawing-room, along with Mr. Percy."

Bryant proceeded there, but found no one. He went up stairs, fancying she might be in her own sitting-room; but when he reached the landing-place he saw, through the half-open door, Alice, in her dressing-room, seated at her desk.

CHAPTER XIII.

BRYANT entered in the dusk. Alice had not heard his arrival, and did not look up from her writing.

“My own Alice,” said Bryant;—she looked up and saw her husband standing over her. She uttered a shriek of terror, and fell senseless at his feet.

“I ought to have remembered her weak, nervous state, and not have ventured to surprise her,” said he, to himself, as he tenderly lifted her on the couch and tried every means to restore her to sensibility. He succeeded, at length; but it was only to see her seized by frightful spasms, which contracted and convulsed her whole body; her cries were piercing; her delicate limbs were tossed and contorted; her head rolled violently from side to side, and no trace remained in her features of the fair and gentle Alice. In a few minutes the violence of the attack subsided, but was followed by immediate insensibility. Bryant was in despair, and terrified beyond expression at this frightful seizure. The whole household, alarmed by her cries, came rushing up stairs. He despatched three men on horse-

back in different directions for medical assistance, whilst her own maid and the housekeeper got her undressed and, assisted by Bryant, laid in bed, without rousing her from the death-like swoon in which she was plunged. When Bryant returned to the dressing-room for a moment, he for the first time perceived the half-finished letter over which she had been occupied when he entered. There was enough written to tell him all that had passed during his absence. Every sorrow in life seemed to be let loose against him at once. A deep flush mounted to his temples, and the veins swelled and throbbed to bursting, but no sound came from his compressed lips. He read the paper over twice; then lighting a taper on the hearth, he held the paper in the flame till every particle was destroyed; a gust of air carried the light black ashes up the chimney, and he returned to his wife's room. She had by this time recovered her senses, but seemed in violent terror, and trembled extremely. She caught a glimpse of her husband through an opening between the curtains and screamed with fear, hiding and cowering under the clothes; the spasms returned more severely than ever; and a horrible suspicion darted into Bryant's mind that she had taken poison. In a state of mind amounting to frenzy he sat beside her bed, trying to shut out from his ears the sound of her cries. At length, after an interval that seemed an eternity, two medical men arrived, one of them the physician who attended the family. Bryant, who could not bear to stand by whilst they consulted, went to the dressing-room, and hiding

his face with his hands, sat in a convulsed and desperate calmness till they came to him. The old family physician, who was also a friend, at length entered.

"Well, sir?" said Bryant sternly.

The old man came up to him, and putting his hand on his shoulder, said, in a voice trembling with tears :

"You must be a man, Bryant. It may be averted even yet, but we fear the worst. That sweet creature"—and here the old man fairly burst into tears.

"Tell me what is the matter," said Bryant, imperiously; "I will know; I insist on having nothing kept from me. What is this sudden and frightful seizure?"

"A most severe attack of hysteria, complicated by spasms of the stomach; and, from her extreme delicacy and the great general debility under which she is labouring, we fear the worst. It is not necessarily fatal—but—but—I dare not say that we are sanguine."

"You are telling me the truth!" said Bryant, fiercely.

"I will not be trifled with. Do you swear to me that it is natural—that she has not taken—that no one has given her—that it is not from—from—medicine"—

"No, no; my dear friend, calm yourself; it is quite natural; it is a frequent form of malady with women, not often so severe. But what do you suspect it arises from? Has she had any strong mental shock or violent emotion to bring it on?"

"Thank God!" said Bryant, fervently, and drawing a breath as of one relieved from intolerable fear. "No, no; I know of nothing, I can account for nothing, and I will have no questions asked;—do you hear? I hate

that prying into every act of the past weeks or months, and straining every insignificant point to yield a reason or a meaning. You will ask nothing, and seek to know nothing. It is enough that she is ill—dying—that you cannot restore her precious soul. Tell me, will she, do you think, be able to recognise me?—to endure to see me?—shall I hear her sweet voice again? Oh, let me but be able to speak to her once more, if it be only for one moment,—let her but be able to hear and understand one word, and I ask no more! Tell me, may I hope for this?”

“We must hope so; we must hope the best; but you will need all your firmness, so much depends on your calmness. You must not see her now; the least excitement would be fatal.”

The old doctor grasped his hand and returned to the bedside of Alice, whilst Bryant remained all that night and the next day sitting at the door of the dressing-room, listening to every sound that proceeded from his wife's room. At length, late in the afternoon, the old doctor came to him; he had been in from time to time to speak such words of comfort as he could, but to compel him to take some food to induce rest was beyond his power. Bryant sat motionless as an Indian Faqueer, rigid in sorrow. He looked up with dull eyes as the doctor appeared.

“If you wish to see her, come now; but be very calm.”

“Let every one else leave the room,” said Bryant, as he followed the doctor, and stood beside his wife. She was lying calm and sensible, but entirely exhausted;

her eyes were sunk, and looked preternaturally large, surrounded with a large violet circle; she trembled when she saw Bryant, and cowered down amongst the bed clothes.

“Am I then so very hateful to you, my poor child?” said Bryant, mournfully.

She did not speak, but looked up in his face with an expression of touching, deprecating helplessness.

“Alice! Alice!” said Bryant, “let me speak to you. I feared you should die without my being able to tell you, not of my pardon, but of my love; poor child! how much you have struggled and suffered, and I was ignorant of it! Why did you not take refuge with me? I would have sheltered you from yourself; you might have trusted me, Alice. I could have sympathised with your temptation, and you should not have been left single-handed to struggle, and to fall at last. Who could have loved you as I did, who could have pitied and sympathised as I would have done? You should not have fallen, I would have won back your heart with such love as must have won you. Oh why did you feel so little confidence in me? Why did you not lean on me in your helplessness? It was not your fault that you were tempted, and I should only have loved you more for your peril; dear child, I do not blame you now. I love you; do not look on me with dread. Think of me as one who loves you better than any earthly thing.”

Alice put out her hand to him, and he took it almost timidly.

"Bryant," said she, in a whisper, "one thing I want you to know: you are not dishonoured—in that one sense, at least, I have been faithful to you. Do you believe me?"

"I do," said Bryant, earnestly.

"Would to God!" continued she, in gasps, as her weakness would permit her—"would to God I had confided all to you. I was a hundred times on the point of doing so. You could have brought back my heart to you ;—but I did not know you—I did not dare to trust you. I see now all the evil I have wrought. Forgive me ; you *can* forgive me, can you not?"

Bryant bent down over her. She looked timidly up to him. He lifted her up in bed, and laid her head upon his bosom, as she had been a child.

"I have no right here now," said she.

"Ever your resting-place!" cried Bryant, fervently. "Would I had sought more to draw you here in love and trust. It was my blame—I ought to have sought you more;—but, Alice, I love you—I have always loved you—I love you as a father, mother, husband, all that the world has of most tender and protecting. I will not fail you ;—cling to me, trust to me;—I love you far more than you can love yourself."

Alice clung to him, like a frightened child.

"Let me die here, Bryant, let me die here; I have no other wish."

"You shall get well darling—you shall not die, now that we have just found each other again."

"No, no, no," said Alice, "it is very merciful thus—it is more than I deserve—to die, and to be taken away from all the evil I have done."

Her tears were falling fast;—at first, they came like a painless gentle rain ; but they became more violent; the convulsions returned, and though not so severe as at first, she had not strength to rally ; fainting followed, and at length she fell into a dead, heavy stupor, from which she never awoke. She died in the evening,—as nearly as could be ascertained, about the hour she was first seized.

"The broken lily lies,
The storm is overpast."

CHAPTER XIV.

BRYANT sat in his room of business the day after Alice had expired ; his head rested upon his arms ; a pile of business-letters, with their seals all unbroken, lay beside him. He was plunged in a deep waking stupor of grief. He had been so overwrought with agony, that the last point of sensation had been passed. Wretches have been known to fall asleep on the rack in the interval of their tortures. A number of thoughts, all more or less irrelevant to the one great thing that possessed him, crawled forth, like rats from their hiding-place, and careered over his desolate mind, exciting no effort on his part to chase them away. From the window he could perceive a half-finished building. His dull eyes followed the men as they went up and down the ladder, carrying their hods of mortar and bricks ; the round of one of the ladders broke, near the top, as the man was stepping upon it, and he and his load of bricks fell to the ground. It did not move him ; he looked on, as though he were reading it in a book. His eyes caught a spot on the carpet where it was much worn,

and he mechanically began to follow the lines and patches, and to count the spots which formed the pattern. The frenzy of grief had subsided, and left him in a lazy stupor of reverie.

A knock came to the door; which he heard, well enough, but did not answer. It was repeated; and the butler entered, to tell his master that he was wanted in the drawing-room. Bryant gave a dull vague stare; and, like one under mesmeric influence, rose, and followed the servant, who held open the drawing-room door and closed it after him.

Bryant advanced listlessly. Conrad stood at the window place, with his eyes fixed on the door. For an instant his features seemed galvanised by a spasm, as the man whom he had so much injured came in; but they became immediately still and rigid; all the traces of mental anguish and fiery passion seemed to have been arrested in their working, and left stamped there with the grim emphasis of death.

Bryant did not raise his eyes, nor perceive him, until he had reached the middle of the room. The men stood face to face, each bearing traces of strong agony, but utterly stilled now, and unable to manifest either life or passion.

Conrad spoke first; his voice came sharp and grating, as if it came from a piece of mechanism.

"Mr. Bryant," said he, "I might have blown out my brains for myself, but that it had become your right to do so. I know that you must be aware of what happened in your absence, and I have no wish to elude

your vengeance. Now make an end speedily. I am at your service, to meet you when you please."

Bryant's eyes gleamed fiercely at Conrad, and he looked like a wild beast in sight of his prey.

"I have only one word to say," continued Conrad, "it may make you think less hardly of *her*. On *me* alone your curse should fall. She was pure in heart, and never guessed my passion till I revealed it. She drove me away from her, she might have escaped if I would have let her. I hunted her down, she had no chance. Ask yourself, did you protect her? When she was struggling, did you stretch out your hand to save her from the toils? She was left to her own strength. Had you taken her away when she entreated you, she had been saved; but your business, your money, your time, your cursed convenience, made you refuse her harshly,—blind fool that you were! She was struggling to be faithful to you—to save your honour, and you saw it not. She was dying with the struggle and you left her to her fate; to save a miserable 'contract,' you left her. You left her in my power; the blood of her soul is on your hands as well as on mine. Oh, when you refused either to remain with her, or to take her away, to whom else could she go but to me who loved her?"

His voice had gradually risen into an hysterical shrillness; the words he uttered came with pain and gashed his soul as though they had been knives. Bryant at first seemed to listen as though he heard not, but the iteration of the words, "You left her, you left her," seemed to rouse him to madness; he crushed his hands together till the

blood started beneath the pressure of the nails, and then, as if a pent-up torrent had broken loose, bearing down all before it,

"Man, man," he cried, in a voice hardly human in its agony, "what gave you the right to torture me? can you say aught I have not said to myself? Do I not know that she was pure? do not I know her worth? Are you a stranger of yesterday to come and teach me her worth; do I not know all, all—what can you know? You who would have degraded her—who only knew her in her fall! Was not her whole life mine, and *you* talk of her!—you, you, you, oh God! that such a thing should be able to mention her name—*you* school me to think less hardly of her!"

After a moment's pause, he seemed to constrain himself by a violent effort, and continued in a calm, bitter tone:

"Listen to me, sir, and take this to heart all the days of your miserable life, and know what it is that you have done. She thought I did not love her, because I had no words like you. She was the very life within my heart. She was the soul of my life. By nature I was cold and proud. I could not make a demonstration of my feelings, but I loved her all the more, because it was her way to show much. You are a gentleman. You taunt me with my attention to business. When a man spends his life in doing a thing, he generally gives his attention to it. You do not know what you talk about when you reproach me with my business. I must have given

my mind to it, or have been ruined, and made her a beggar. Perhaps I was too much engrossed. Such things grow on one. I knew not that she was pining for more love, more sympathy, than I had power to show. I knew it not; I guessed it not, God knows. You came, sir; you were a man of fashion, a man of gallantry, a man of intrigue. This thing you have attempted is nothing in the eyes of your own set; it would not live a week in one of your scandalous journals. The device by which you obtained a footing in the family, and blinded my eyes, will cover you with applause; it will be a jest, a good after-dinner story for a month; and this will be all the trace it leaves in your horizon—it is a very little thing, an episode of three months; and, to furnish food for your ennui, you have consumed the life and soul of a woman, on whom God had bestowed His most precious things. You have degraded a man who only sought to do you good. You have uprooted me from the face of the earth. What I shall be in another world, God alone knows; you have made me an outcast in this; and you will make a jest of it. I am become the legitimate object of a jest; I am become—what you have made me.”

Hitherto he had controlled himself, but now a multitude of thoughts were roused; an intense hatred entered into him like a demon, and he felt powerless to give it utterance.

“Killing you,” he exclaimed, “would not slack my hatred.” But his words were lost in an inarticulate gurgling.

"God knows," said Conrad, "I have no wish to escape your vengeance ; I came to offer you my life ; it is all the atonement I can make. Your lot is enviable compared to mine ; to revoke the last six months I would willingly never have lived."

The ravages that misery had made on the young and handsome features of Conrad struck Bryant even at this desperate moment.

"I am not going to fight you," said he, more calmly ; "*her* name shall not be sullied ; your death in a duel would cause inquiries, comments, in the newspapers. You must live, as I shall have to do. I believe that you are sorry, now that you have to pay the penalty of your sin ; but go, or the devil within me will be roused again—I should kill you where you stand. Let me see you no longer—go."

"Are you a coward, then, that you refuse to fight me? What more can I do?"

"Go—let me never see you more."

"I cannot live, I will not live!" cried Conrad, passionately.

"*She* shall not be made the subject of slanderous gossip—*she* shall have peace in the grave, where you have laid her. You talk of death! What have you done to earn such a blessing?"

"Bryant, you may safely fight me. What cowardice, what folly is this—we must fight."

"Have not I to live also?" rejoined the other, sternly. He pointed silently to the door. Conrad quailed beneath the deep, scornful misery that looked from his

eyes. He felt constrained to obey; but when he reached the door he stopped, and, with a sudden impulse, turning round, he flung himself on the floor at Bryant's feet, exclaiming, in quick, broken tones—

“Be merciful, and kill me—or, if you will have me live—I will swear to do so : but as life is your sentence, for the love of Heaven be merciful—let me look on her once more. I will swear to go hence to redeem the future. I will live—live. You understand—I will be your galley slave, and live my life out to the end. But think what it is you lay on me. I have no claim to what I ask; but, as one prays to God in deepest need, I implore you to let me look on her once more. As God shall hear you—and surely you have sinned against Him—as you hope to be heard by Him, let me see her. I am kneeling to you—let me see her. As you are a man, look on my misery—let me see her, and I will swear to live.”

His agony of entreaty could not utter itself in words: but that tone of intense supplication, addressed by one human being to another, was almost fearful. In the midst of his own wrongs and hatred, Bryant could not help feeling a sort of pity at the sight of the young man's desolation. Death had taken away all littleness from his sorrow; he was moved; and, placing his hand on Conrad's shoulder, he said, in a husky voice, “Come with me.”

They passed up the large staircase, and stood before the chamber of death. Bryant took out a key, unlocked the door, and they entered together.

There, on the bed surrounded with heavy crimson draperies, lay the white, cold form of Alice, utterly insensible to the misery of the two beings whom she had loved best in life. There was something frightful in the changeless calm of that which still bore the semblance of passionate humanity. Conrad uttered a sharp cry at the sight of her, and fell, in strong convulsions, over the footboard of the bed.

In the midst of his own sorrow, Bryant felt a flash of triumph to think that in death she was all his own; and that Conrad, the intruder, the usurper, stood there an alien, without the power to take a last look except by his permission.

It was beyond his strength to remove Conrad, but with the assistance of the butler he was taken to another chamber. He went not near him himself, but, with proud, Arab-like hospitality, ordered medical assistance and every needful attention for him, and then locked himself in the room where the dead lay. There, sitting beside the bed, one hand clasping that of Alice, he watched all night, feeling that she was all his own once more.

Men must lose some dear object by death before they can realise the invisible world: we must have a stake in it before we can believe it.

Sitting there, beside his dead wife, Bryant was admitted to the threshold of the unseen state. What now to him was the dream of life, with all its highly-coloured appearances?—hope and fear were alike dead:

he sat in the presence of the Invisible, and calmness came gradually to his soul.

Alice's weakness—Conrad's treachery—his own wounded pride—all seemed now hushed to insignificance in the presence of the great, mysterious fact of Death; even his grief seemed small and idle. What was he that he should complain? The tumult and glare which had surrounded all things subsided before the cold, colourless light of death, with whom "neither variableness nor shadow of turning" may dwell.

He left that chamber in the early dawn of the next morning with some portion of the eternal calmness on his own soul.

He did not trust himself to see Conrad, who lay in a brain fever. He ordered that he should receive all needful attention, and a regular nurse was hired for him.

Bryant left the house immediately after the funeral.

It was many days before Conrad recovered sufficiently to leave his room. He had been dealt with by a hand not of man, and when he left his sick room years seemed to have passed over his head.

He entreated the old butler to let him once more enter the room where he had seen Alice dead. The old man gave him the key, and he repaired thither alone.

The hangings of the bed and all the arrangements of the room were the same as before, but Alice

had passed away—even the lifeless form that had been there was now hidden for ever from the eyes of all men.

He stooped, and reverently kissed the pillow on which he had seen her laid, and left the room without looking back.

CHAPTER XV.

THE walls of the town of B—— were all placarded in large letters, of every colour in the rainbow, with the “Immense Attraction, for five Nights only, of Mademoiselle Bianca,” who would make her first appearance that evening in her celebrated character of *Juliet*, in Shakspeare’s play.

Bianca arrived about the middle of the day, and found herself for the first time on the scene of her early struggles; she had not visited the town since she left it in the train of Mr. Simpson’s equestrian troop. Had she been asked then, her position of to-day would have seemed the realisation of her most fabulous dreams; and yet now she was as little able to sit down and rest as she had been then. The stars in heaven all seem the same distance from us, all of them seem to us to be let into the smooth solid-looking vault that roofs the earth, and *we must get up there* before we can believe in the very terrestrial sort of glory it would be that we should find.

With all this, however, Bianca felt a whimsical sort of satisfaction in returning under such different auspices;

she had attained an object by dint of her own resolute efforts, and there is always a complacent feeling in success of any kind. It is always more satisfactory to learn even the worthlessness of an object by success than by failure.

Bianca had to proceed at once to rehearsal, which proved a long and wearisome affair. After it was over, she proceeded on foot to find out the old lodgings where she had formerly resided. There had been so many changes in the neighbourhood, that she had some difficulty in finding her way. The old court was still standing, but most of the former inhabitants had passed away, and altogether the place was much more desolate-looking, and the people of a lower and rougher description than when she left it : to be sure, eight additional years of total abstinence from paint and whitewash had materially darkened the face of things, and accounted for the dilapidated, demoralised look of the place; it had become, as the policeman told her, "a very low neighbourhood."

She addressed a disorderly, good-natured woman, who was standing at an open door, surrounded by several other women, who were gazing at her in great curiosity, and inquired where Mrs. Mullins lived.

For some time nobody could tell any thing about Mrs. Mullins, and the whole court was gathered together to hear what was wanted. At last a heavy black-looking man, who was leaning lazily against a door-post with a pipe in his mouth, announced that "if it were the woman whose husband used to be the ostler at the

‘Black Swan,’ she was gone to the House, for her master had got a kick from a vicious horse, which had lamed him entirely, and when they could carry on no longer they had to go to the House.”

“What house? Where?” asked Bianca, bewildered.

“Why the Union, to be sure,” answered the man; “I reckon it is only poor folks who knows where it is.”

“Aye, aye, poor folk must be thankful for any thing,” said one of the women in a scolding tone; “they have pig-sties like these to live in whilst they can work hard, and the House to prison them when they are wore out.”

Bianca turned away, glad to escape. As she went, she gave a trifle to a child, whom she saw assisting an aged woman, probably its grandmother, to crawl up and down the flags in the sunshine, that came slanting over the roofs.

“I have to be thankful for much that I was nearly forgetting,” thought she, as she emerged into the main street.

Her next visit was to find the old priest, who had been her friend. She soon reached the dark low house attached to the little chapel; it was situated in a very poor and densely populated neighbourhood. She was shown into his little parlour by the housekeeper, not the one Bianca remembered. The priest looked up from his writing as she entered.

“You have forgotten me, father,” said Bianca; as the priest seemed searching his memory.

"Do you remember a young girl in the circus here some years ago?"

"Ah!" said the old man, with an indescribable reserve.

"I am she. You have not forgotten how kind you were to me and to my mother; and here is the little book you gave me with your own name in it, and you told me to be always a good girl; this is the first time I have been in the town since."

"Ah, indeed, yes," said the old man, putting off his spectacles; "I remember you now, but I should not have known you. And how is the good lady, your mother?"

"It has pleased God to take her away from me," replied Bianca.

The priest's face assumed a look of gravity, as if it were the habitual expression on the receipt of such intelligence. "I will say a prayer for her to-night."

"Thank you, father."

"Well," rejoined the old man, "and what have you been doing all these years? It was a bad way of life you were in, I trust you have quitted it."

"I have left the circus," said Bianca, smiling; "but I fear I am still in a way you will not approve of—I belong to the theatre still."

"Well, well, many of your class when they become weary of the world to which they have dedicated their best days, have grace given them to renounce it, and to hide themselves in a cloister; and many I could name have become shining examples of piety; we

must despair of no one; even Mary Magdalene, you know, was honoured to become a saint, though no one could have led a worse life.—Grace may find you anywhere.”

Bianca felt inexpressibly chilled and disappointed by the old man's tone; she had come to seek him with her heart overflowing with the recollection of his kindness, and rejoiced like a child at the thought of seeing him once more. The utter absence of every thing like human nature in his manner,—the frigid professional tone of his exhortation,—threw all that back upon her heart. He had become a PRIEST, and nothing more; and she knew no spell by which she could penetrate through the dry filigree work with which his heart was incrustured. It was another phase of her past life blotted out of the golden book of recollection: she had attempted to bring it back into the present, and the whole vanished like the figures in a magic mirror, on the attempt of the beholder to approach and grasp them. The old priest—the fatherly friend, whose image she had so gratefully cherished—was gone: a dry, bigotted old man, who had lost all interest in her, remained in his place. And yet it was only the natural indifference of old age, aided by the total absence of all human affections (for the old man had no relatives), which had wrought this change; he now did his duty with a single eye to his own salvation, and considered that the less mortal feeling mingled with it the better. Every thing that centres in *self*, even if it be the saving of our own soul, makes a very barren and uninteresting result.

have prospered in the world since you saw me, and I have brought you a small offering. I go amongst the poor myself, and I prefer its going through your hands; if amongst your poor is any one situated as I was, let her have a double share. If there be any good work in which you are engaged, I shall rejoice to aid to the extent of my power."

"Ah!" said the priest, brightening up at the sight of the handsome sum Bianca had placed in his hand, "this will be a great help to the Sisters of Mercy,—they are very poor."

"Have you established a House, then?" asked Bianca. "It was touching the right chord; and with more simplicity than he had yet shown, the old man asked if she would like to visit it. Bianca eagerly assented. She had never seen a convent, but often when weighed down with sorrow, or wearied with labour, she indulged in vague thoughts of ending her days in a convent; especially since her disappointment in Conrad, the

idea of a convent had hovered before her like a haven of repose after she should have finished her labours.

He took her to a small house adjoining the chapel, where the sisterhood were located, until such time as a suitable dwelling should be erected to receive them.

The lady superior, a severe, majestic-looking woman, received them with much civility, but from behind an indescribable wall of reserve, that separated her as completely from those she addressed, as if she had been an inhabitant of another world made visible.

At Bianca's request they were conducted over the house. It was "the hour of recreation," and the sisters were seated at a long table, some of them writing, some reading, but most of them engaged in needle-work. They all looked very picturesque, for the Catholic understands costume; but there was a stony sweetness of expression on their faces, as if all spontaneity of thought and will had been petrified into a placid negation. Bianca experienced a sense of something almost like fear, at the aspect of so much humanity quelled down and buried beneath a concrete of inflexible obedience to an artificial authority, through which no blade of genuine spontaneity could spring. All aspirations of devotion, even the very works of mercy to which they had dedicated themselves, seemed to have been drilled to rules, till they weighed down on the soul like a nightmare. Bianca felt stifled in that low, close house, tenanted by these bodies destitute of a will! She placed an offering in the poor's box, and hastened to quit the place.

"Farewell, daughter," said the old man; "and, remember, when you are weary of the service of the world, Holy Church will open her arms to receive you to a quiet resting-place."

Bianca drew a deep breath, when she was fairly in the street. "Any thing but that, any thing but that," said she, to herself; "no amount of weariness or suffering shall induce me to commit moral suicide,—I am free, at least, to lead my own life, and suffer my own sufferings! I will never dream of a cowardly escape again!"

When she reached her hotel it was late; and she had barely time to dine, and repose for half an hour, before it was time to proceed to the theatre.

Whilst she was dressing, her maid told her that a respectable looking young woman had been inquiring for her, and seemed so much disappointed that she could not see her, that the maid had desired her to call the next morning, at nine o'clock. Bianca listened to all this with great indifference, and as at that moment she was called, she did not make any inquiries—indeed, had quite forgotten the whole matter, when the next morning, as she was sitting at breakfast, the door of her sitting-room was thrown open, and the waiter announced, “A young woman to speak to you, ma'am.” Bianca looked up, and recognised Simmonds, Alice's maid, who had been very kind to her when she was Alice's *protégée*.

“Why, Simmonds! is that you? I am very glad to see you—come and sit down, and have some breakfast, and tell me how you left your mistress—is she here? have you brought me any message from her?”

“Oh! Miss Bianca, my poor missis, my poor missis!” exclaimed Simmonds, passionately.

“What of her? tell me quick,” cried Bianca, remarking, for the first time, the deep mourning of the woman's dress, “has she lost her husband? is Mr. Bryant dead?”

Simmonds sobbed more violently, and did not reply; at length she said, “No, no, he has lost missis, and if ever there was an angel in the world she was it.”

"Alice dead!" said Bianca, stupified.

"Ah! indeed, yes, ma'am, I knew you had a respect for her, and that made me come and tell you; I thought, may be, you had not heard. I saw your name on the walls, and I felt sure it must be you."

Bianca poured out a cup of coffee, and handed it to Simmonds, who, like all women of her class, now that the violence of her emotion had subsided, began to feel the consolation of talk.

"Ah! Miss Bianca, missis was very fond of you, and often used to speak of you to me; she would have shown more to you, only master said you were an actress, and he did not like his wife to know you. Ah! in my opinion, this would never have happened if you had been there."

Bianca, still stunned with the intelligence she had just heard, sat dimly conscious that Simmonds was speaking. At length, putting her hand to her head, she said, like one speaking out of a dream:

"Did you say just now that Alice was dead?"

"Indeed I did, ma'am, it is only too true; but oh, Miss Bianca, don't look in that way, it hurts me to see you, indeed it does."

"Tell me, when did she die?" said Bianca.

"A month ago last Wednesday," replied the woman.

"Master is just heart-broke now it is too late. He left the house after the funeral; but Mr. Conrad is still there, and quite out of his senses."

"Mr. Conrad Percy!" said Bianca, quite bewildered, "what has he to do with the matter?"

"Well, Miss Bianca," said Simmonds, mysteriously,

"I don't mind speaking to you, for I know it will go no further; but there is not another mortal person to whom I would say what I am going to tell you. I think it is nowise honourable for a servant to go and spread reports about the family; a confidential servant, too, as I may say, for the missis told me any thing—nothing passed in the house without my knowing, and I have my own thoughts about things. Well, then, ma'am, if I must say it," continued she, lowering her voice, and looking round mysteriously, "Mr. Conrad and missis were great companions;—master was always busy with his own affairs, and did not know how to manage her; he would leave her alone for days together, and perhaps hardly speak to her sometimes for a week. I have seen missis often and often come up into her own room and cry about it, though she never said a word to me; but she could not help my seeing; and Mr. Conrad was very fond of her, he worshipped the ground she trod upon; my opinion is, that he went into partnership with master, only to have an excuse to come to the house—though, of course, I would not say so to any body in the world but you. As to missis, she was as innocent as a lamb; but it killed her—I know it was that and nothing else. She never had those dreadful spasms before; and if master would only have opened his eyes and taken a little notice, she might have been alive now. With my own ears I heard her ask him to take her away with him, when he went to Paris, and he refused, because he was going on business. 'His business' came before every thing, and

missis was hurt at always coming second to a parcel of rubbishing iron. He is sorry enough now, poor man!"

"Well," said Bianca, more and more bewildered—

"Well, ma'am, it is not a thing one ought to say lightly, but my mind misgives me that missis was going away with Mr. Conrad. He came again after master went to France. I met him in the hall just as he was going out; he looked quite strange and bewildered; he took me for Mrs. Lauriston (master's sister), and said something that Mrs. Bryant was ill, and could not see me. I went straight to the parlour, and saw missis, who was going up-stairs. I shall never forget her face whilst I live, so stony and desperate looking. Ah! poor thing, she never came down those stairs again, till she was carried in her coffin!"

Simmonds burst into fresh tears at the end of her recital. Bianca sat without speaking, utterly stupified by what she heard. Simmonds continued—

"Whilst missis lay dying, Mr. Conrad roamed like a spirit round the house; he never darkened a door, but wandered up and down the park like a man beside himself. He climbed up to the window of her room once; I saw him, and went down to speak to him. It would have made a stone pitiful to see him, with his hair all matted on his forehead, his eyes like glass, and his face quite dreadful to look at—twenty years seemed to have passed over his head. Master took on dreadful, too; but it was his own fault, in one way,—if he had only shown more what he had felt, none of this would have happened. Missis was like

a child, and a kind word was more to her than a fine present. She and master were quite reconciled at the last, and she died quite composed; but she suffered dreadful tortures. I am sure my heart is almost broke to think of all the misery there was. Master let Mr. Conrad see her after all was over, and it nearly killed him. Master behaved very handsome, and said every thing was to be done for him; but the poor young man is not long for this world, I am thinking. I don't know who is most to be pitied. Master looked dreadfully ill when he went away; they say he is gone abroad. All the servants had their wages paid them, and a quarter over, and the house is to be shut up; only Mr. Thompson, the butler, is left in charge of it. Every thing looks so strange and desolate, even in this short time, that you would hardly know the place, Miss Bianca."

Bianca had concealed her face in her hands, and remained silently leaning her head on the arm of the sofa. Wounds, hardly closed in her own soul, were opened afresh; and she staggered under a bewildering sense of misery which seemed to encompass her about on all sides. She could not weep: her whole being was parched with torture, every thing was blotted out in the world; it seemed to her that she alone remained a living thing in it, and that her whole vitality had diminished down to a single point—the consciousness of pain.

"Dear, dear Miss Bianca! do not you take on so," said the sympathising Simmonds, fancying that Bianca was

weeping, the only manifestation of sorrow women like her can understand.

The waiter entered with letters, and said that a person was waiting to see Bianca on business.

"Show the person in," said Bianca. She had no more time for the indulgence of emotion, her sorrow had to be imprisoned in her heart, till she was at liberty to return to it. The business of life is imperative, and will not stop till we are consoled; it rolls along day by day, like a great Juggernaut, indifferent whether we are carried in its train or crushed beneath its track.

"Well, Simmonds," said she, when the waiter departed, "if you have not suited yourself with a better situation, will you like to remain with me? My present maid has more than she can do, and will be very glad of a companion. I should like to have you with me, for you were very faithful to her who is gone. Will you stay with me?"

"Indeed! indeed, Miss Bianca, I will be only too glad if you think I shall suit you, for I always liked you, and so did poor missis."

"Then it is agreed," said Bianca, "that you come to me on the same terms. You may go now. Can you be ready to come to-night, or will to-morrow suit you better."

"Just when you please, Miss Bianca; I think to-night, if it is all the same to you, for I feel quite low-spirited by myself; and now I will wish you good morning."

Simmonds curtsyed herself out of the room, with a flutter of satisfaction, for which she reproached herself as hard-hearted: but the truth was, that Simmonds had always cherished a secret wish to see something of the world; and now, to be engaged as own maid to a great actress, and to have the prospect of seeing a play whenever she pleased, was an immense satisfaction, that insinuated itself into her heart, whether she consented to its admission or not.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONRAD left that room, crushed under a weight of unutterable misery, sensible of nothing but the blind desire to get away from the house which had been cursed for his sake.

There was something weird-like and menacing in the desolate stillness of that deserted place. It seemed, to his morbid fancy, that he had left the living world, and passed "into the land where all things are forgotten," and where the souls of men await in gloomy half consciousness, the judgment for "the deeds done in the body."

"How soon can I have a chaise to take me away from here?" asked he.

"In an hour, if you wish it, sir," replied the old man. "But, are you quite sure that you are well enough to travel? The last orders that master gave were, that you should not go till you were quite recovered."

"And where is your master?" asked Conrad.

The butler shook his head, as he replied—"Master went away the day of the funeral, and we none of us know where to. I do not think, somehow, that he knew himself. All the servants were discharged, and

only I and my sister, who lives at the lodge, were left in charge of the things here. I cannot say when master will come back. I have lived in this place, man and boy, nigh fifty years, and it hurts me to see things gone so desolate. He is a good man, Mr. Bryant, and it is a sore heart he has taken away with him !”

Conrad groaned—it was as if a hot iron had been thrust against him.

“ See that the chaise is here as soon as possible. I must go hence to-day.”

“ If you are quite determined, sir, there is a letter master left with me, desiring that you might have it before you went.”

The old man left the room, and shortly returned with a sealed letter. So soon as Conrad was alone, he broke the seal and read as follows :

“ Conrad, do not waste your time in useless grieving. If we never meet again, I tell you now, that I forgive you. Waste no more of your life, but do somewhat that shall redeem the past. I wish you to live, and to make yourself respected. You are still young, and may hope that much time lies before you.

“ JOHN BRYANT.”

A few words had been added just before the signature, but they had been carefully blotted out.

Conrad bowed his head upon his hands and wept bitterly.

In about half an hour the butler announced that the chaise was at the door. Conrad wrung the old man’s

hand, without speaking, and flung himself back in the vehicle, covering his face to avoid the last look of the home he had rendered desolate.

Conrad had formed no plan for himself; he mechanically ordered the horses' heads to be turned towards London. His lodgings were there, and so was his servant; otherwise there was no reason why he should have gone there, rather than to the other end of the world. He belonged to no one—his kindred were not nearly related to him, and he had never been on terms of intimacy with any of them. The journey passed over in one vague gloomy reverie. He was unconscious of all the incidents that occurred, although he mechanically performed his part at the different stages.

It was nearly dusk when the chaise drove up to the door of his lodgings, and his appearance caused some commotion in the house. He was evidently not expected; his servant was from home, and his landlady ushered him herself, with many apologies, into his sitting-room, which wore the half dull, half dirty look, which all lodgings in town are prone to assume. The furniture, all in its wrong place, stood stiff and uncomfortable against the walls; no fire was in the grate; the windows had not been recently cleaned, and the foggy remains of daylight dimly struggled through them. A pile of letters, visiting cards, circulars, and bills, lay on the table beside his meerschaum, and a half emptied box of cigars, whilst a faint odour of tobacco lingered on the close, cold atmosphere of the room.

Conrad was too weary and too miserable to take any

special note of the discomfort, although in general he was very sensitive to such influences. He threw himself on the sofa, until such time as his servant should return.

It was now become quite dark, and the gas-lights from the streets were glaring on the walls, making both the light and the darkness look equally harsh. He knew not how long he had lain when his servant entered with the lamp. He started back at the first aspect of his master, who was so changed by his illness as to be hardly recognisable. "Good Heaven! Mr. Conrad, sir, you are come back looking like a ghost! I had grown quite unhappy about you: I did not know where you were to be found, and so could not forward your letters. I had only just gone out, and have not left the house for more than a week before."

"How long have I been away?" asked Conrad, abruptly.

"Five weeks to-morrow, sir," replied the man, surprised.

"I thought it had been a hundred years. What day of the week is it?"

"Thursday, sir."

"Ah, indeed!" said Conrad, endeavouring to recollect.

Nature is a benevolent mother; our weakness is at once our limitation and our deliverance; when our sufferings become utterly unendurable, she bewilders our perception of it, and steepens our senses in forgetfulness.

Conrad was thus stupified; staggering, too, under the weakness of a recent illness, he gave in like a baffled

swimmer, and ceased to struggle with the deep waters that were overwhelming him.

"I am sure, sir, you are very ill," said the man, compassionately; "you will be better in bed."

"No, no," replied Conrad, impatiently, turning away his head and closing his eyes, "let me alone, let me alone."

"But, sir, you look in a high fever, and must really let yourself be led."

Conrad made a fretful gesture, but the man persisted, and at length succeeded in getting him to his room; he was like one drunk with misery.

"Shall I leave you a light, sir?"

"No, darkness, darkness, let me be in cold and darkness for ever."

The servant retired, but determined that if his master were not more like a reasonable being in the morning he would fetch a doctor on his own responsibility.

The next morning, when he proceeded to his room, he found Conrad in a heavy stupor, from which he could not arouse him. The doctor arrived and declared congestion of the brain to be imminent, and proceeded at once to strong measures.

For many days after this, Conrad lay utterly unconscious of all that was going on around him; and even when out of danger he had such a tedious and precarious convalescence, owing to several severe relapses, that it was several weeks before he could leave his room. No condition in life can well be more desolate than that of a man without either mother or

sisters, falling ill in lodgings. Conrad, however, was fortunate in having a servant who was much attached to him, and who tended him very carefully. He had lived with him many years, and of course knew all his affairs rather better than his master himself. He contrived, from various indications, to discover where it was that his master had been during his late absence (for Conrad had carefully avoided giving him any clue), and then he pretty well surmised all that had taken place. He had, indeed, settled in his own mind how matters would end long before either Conrad or Alice dreamed of their danger. People in his class do not understand delicate distinctions; they have a rough, coarse way of judging of things, which, however, often comes nearer to the actual truth than a more subtle philosophy would have led them.

Conrad remained plunged in an apathy from which nothing could rouse him, and the gloom thickened every day.

One morning he entered his master's room with an air of suppressed importance; a happy thought had struck him.

"Dear heart, sir," said he, as he was dressing him, "I wish you would see some of your old friends, many of them called whilst you were lying ill. I did not tell you yesterday (speaking of your friends reminds me of it), that whilst I was in at the confectioner's buying some grapes, Miss Bianca came in; she knew me directly, and began to speak to me quite kind and plea-

sant, and I made bold to tell her how ill you had been, and she seemed quite put out of the way about it."

Conrad did not speak, but he looked as if he were listening, and Walters went on.

"Do you know, sir, I think Miss Bianca is a very kind, nice young lady, and I think it is a great pity you never see her now. It would do you good to talk to her, she seemed so sorry as never was when I told her about your illness."

Walters said no more, but he had touched the only chord which in the present state of things could move Conrad. After Walters had left him, it seemed as if the desire to see once more Bianca began like a spark of life to assert itself. He waited until Walters next entered the room (for he had not energy to ring the bell), and then desired him to bring the cab round and prepare to drive him to Bianca's house.

Walters brought him his hat and gloves, put his cloak around him, and placed him in the cab, as if he had been a child; for at the last moment Conrad shrank back, it looked so impossible to go.

Bianca was not at home when they arrived, but Conrad was coaxed into waiting for her. The servant ushered him into a pleasant parlour, the windows of which opened to the ground and looked into a small garden tastefully though rather fantastically laid out; it was Bianca's usual sitting-room. It was very simply furnished; but it had a bright home look with its fresh chintz hangings, and bookshelves all round the room, and stands of plants and

vases of choice flowers. A bust in marble, beautifully executed, of her old friend, stood on a pedestal, and the pure bright sunlight streamed full upon it.

As Conrad lay on the couch before the window, he felt himself gradually penetrated with a sense of pleasure at the change from his own large, dim, heavy-looking rooms to this cheerful region.

Suddenly he heard Bianca's voice in the hall—a rush of mingled feelings made him wish that he could sink into the earth to hide from her eyes. Bianca entered in the midst of his misgivings; without speaking, she went up to him, and they grasped each other's hands in silence. Much as Bianca desired to control herself, the tears gushed from her eyes at the sight of the ravages the last few months had wrought upon Conrad. His hair had grown quite gray, his figure was bent, and almost reduced to a skeleton; his thin pale face was stamped with a look of settled pain. For some time they were both unable to speak.

"I am come back to you, Bianca," said Conrad at length, in a voice hardly audible.

"And to whom else should you go in sorrow?" replied she, in a kind, calm voice, for she had regained the mastery over herself, and did not wish to agitate him; she sat down on the sofa beside him.

"Oh! Bianca, if I had never left you, I should not now be thus," said Conrad.

"Hush!" said she, gently, "let the past be past, we will not speak of it."

"Would that it might indeed be past," said he,

gloomily,—“but nothing can die that has once been! —Bianca,” continued he, after a pause, “I felt that I must come to you again—do you forgive me?”

She looked at him with the tenderest pity in her large clear eyes.

“There is nothing to forgive between friends,” said she; “you are come to seek me when you were in sorrow, what more could you do? Do not let your thoughts dwell on the past; think of me as your mother, as your sister.” She rose, and began to arrange the pillows for his head, as if he had been a sick child. “Now, you must be very quiet; you are not strong enough to talk.”

Conrad obeyed; her manner was inexpressibly tender and maternal; he felt soothed and comforted, as Orestes might have been when he was beside Electra. Her grief had given to her features that expression of refinement and softness which nothing but sorrow can give. She then took her netting, and seated herself on a chair beside the couch.

“Bianca! are *you* Alice?” said Conrad, suddenly,—“you had *her* face this moment.”

“No, no, dear Conrad, you are dreaming,” said she, soothingly, for she began to fear that his mind was unsettled.

“You are so strangely like her,” persisted Conrad. “How wonderful, if her soul should have passed into you, in order to come back and comfort me!—You never used to look like her.”

“You did not perceive it, perhaps,” replied Bianca;

"if I am really like her, it is not so strange as it appears—there is a secret I never told you."

"Is there?" said Conrad, absently, for he was still filled with the sense of awe which the resemblance inspired. Since Bianca's sorrow it had indeed become strikingly developed.

"Do not go away from me, Bianca," said Conrad, as she rose from her chair.

"No, dear friend, I am not going to leave you, I only want to show you a picture."

She went to her desk and took thence a small miniature.

"Have you never seen a picture like that?" said she, giving it to him.

"Alice had one in her room—a portrait of her father"—

"And that is a portrait of my father also."

"Who and what are you then?" asked Conrad, wildly.

"Alice was my half sister, although she was ignorant of it."

"But, Bianca, explain all this—tell me every thing; why did you keep this from me? tell me quickly, but come back and sit beside me; do not go so far off."

She complied, and returning to her seat beside the couch, she told him the history with which the reader is already acquainted.

"Oh, Bianca," he exclaimed, when she ceased to speak, "how strangely all has happened! I cannot tell you the good it does me to know this; but I also have

many things to tell you, and that which you must know before I can feel sure that you have forgiven me."

"Not to-day, Conrad; you have been already too much agitated. Besides, I already know much of what you would tell me."

Dinner was now brought in.

"Now, Conrad," said Bianca, "remember you are my patient, and I shall be a most despotic nurse; you must eat what I give you."

"If you have poison for me I will drink it," said Conrad.

"Well, that is quite right, only just now some of this fowl and a glass of Madeira will do you more good."

After dinner Conrad fell asleep for near an hour. Bianca gazed upon him with the kind of yearning tenderness a mother might feel towards a storm-tossed, misguided son, who after many wanderings should return destitute and broken to the shadow of his home. The deep life-long affection she had cherished for him was recompensed at last, although in a different mode to what she had once expected. Still it was an inexpressible consolation to feel that it had not been wasted; he had recognised her love when he fell into sorrow, and it was beside her that he had come to find rest. It was abundant recompence and consolation for all she had suffered. Her affection for him had, it was true, changed its character. All passionate emotion had passed away; she was disenchanted of all her illusions with regard to him. He was no longer the idol before whom she worshipped, and to whom she vainly dedicated her gifts. The fiery

pain in which her soul had been steeped on his account had passed away, and it was now become as if it had been written in a book concerning another person.

She felt a mournful presentiment that he was wrecked for life—that his career was finished in the midst of his days; and, with her heart purified from all personal emotion, and selfish feeling, she made a vow in her heart, to be to him henceforth—mother, sister, friend. When he awoke he seemed refreshed—the look of deep pain was lightened.

The day was beginning to decline, and Walters appeared with the cab, to take his master home before the evening set in.

“I am sure you must be an angel from heaven, Miss Bianca,” said the man, in a low voice; “Master looks better already. May I bring him again to-morrow?”

“Oh, yes,” said Bianca, with a smile, “if he does not come of his own accord.”

Life does not end in a catastrophe like a book or a play. We may, and do feel, after some occurrence which has shaken our being to its centre, as though we had reached the end of the world, and that our next step must be out on sheer nothingness; but it is not so. Life goes on until death receives it; made up of the same stuff as heretofore, and filled up with natural occurrences. The day after that one, which once seemed to us as though it must be the end of our being, comes as fresh, and unscarred, as the first that dawned on Eden.

Both Bianca and Conrad had each touched a point in their experience beyond which it seemed impossible for life to proceed. But neither their sorrow, nor their passionate despair, had been realities. The darkness which hung over them had dispersed; and Life still stretched before them with a Future hung in the distance, and shrouding the end as of old.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHILST these things were going on in England, Lord Melton, utterly unconscious of them, was wandering hither and thither with great perseverance. He had been to Egypt, seen Ali Pacha, inspected the Pyramids, and all the wonderful remains of tombs and temples and statues. The Egyptians, who deified LIFE—that one notion of religion running through all their forms of worship—were the people who erected the most gorgeous dwelling-places to DEATH, its twin mystery. He also made excursions into the Desert; took sundry family dinners with Bedouin Arabs, whose encampment he fell in with; made a collection of shawls and pipes, and any curiosities he fancied Bianca would like, or that would amuse her. He had constantly written long letters to her, and to his sister, detailing his adventures; but as curious readers have had all manner of the very best Oriental details in “Eöthen,” and Warburton they can the better afford to go without them now; at least it satisfies our conscience for not purposing to give them any; we really cannot go so far

out of our way. We only wish to find Lord Melton, who, after ten months' wanderings, arrived in Athens. He had quite made up his mind that letters would be awaiting him from his sister and from Bianca: but whether his directions had not been sufficiently precise, or whether his various correspondents had nothing to say which they considered worth foreign postage, or whether their precious letters had gone to enrich the treasury of the moon (the paradise of lost things), it is impossible to say; all we know is, that not a single letter or newspaper had arrived for Lord Melton, and that his lordship was, as his valet expressed it, "very much put out of the way" in consequence. People must be in a foreign land, and counting the days until they reach the place where their letters ought to be, before they can know the dead, sickening blank, of hearing that there are none. An incredulous disappointment, and a disposition to storm the post-office, or to bribe the clerks to any amount to unsay their intelligence and find a letter, seems a feasible miracle. If people only knew the amount of suffering entailed by negligence, they would not allow a small amount of hindrance to prevent their letters being as certain as sunrise. Lord Melton was bitterly disappointed; and the consciousness of feeling himself a very ill-used man, with the full privilege of unlimited sulkiness, was a very poor compensation. Added to which, the heat of the weather, and the fatigues of his journey, threw him into a high fever. He had been unwell for some days, but on the night of his arrival at Athens, he became so ill that he had to

send for a physician, and submit himself during many days to medical discipline. When he was again able to travel (indeed almost before it was prudent), he proceeded to Constantinople, although he heard that the plague was going about like influenza. Constantinople was the next place where he had directed his letters to be sent, and he would have gone if there had been fifty plagues instead of one.

When he reached Constantinople, he immediately despatched a messenger to the embassy for his letters and newspapers. This time he was not disappointed. He eagerly opened a closely written letter from Bianca, and read it all through ; but the veins stood out on his forehead, his countenance was flushed, and his lips compressed, till all their colour was driven back. When he had finished reading it, he looked carefully to see whether under the seal, or in a postscript, there might not be some word or line he had overlooked ; but he found none. Then, with a gesture of rage, he crumpled the letter in his hand, and flung it vehemently to the other end of the room.

For a few moments he seemed literally choking—he flung his arms above his head, and then walked rapidly up and down the room, as though he would, by motion, calm the rage which was convulsing him.


“What a fool I am!—what a double fool, to let myself be so played upon. That cursed Conrad! Oh, that I could kill him, stamp the life out of him! To come crawling back to her, after he had insulted her, abandoned her, because he saw another valued the prize

he flung away! And Bianca!—but all women are alike; none have truth, none have sense; she knew, and had proved what he was, and now writes to me that he has come back to her, with a cursed bland complacency, as if it were the most natural thing in the world! Why did she not invite me to the wedding-breakfast at once—or to assist at the ceremony and give her away?—it needed but that to be complete! She cares for nothing but herself when it comes to the point.”

His words, which came like a torrent, broken by rocks and obstacles, instead of calming him, seemed to lash him into fresh fury. There was something fearful in the sight of one usually so self-controlled, thus moved. The whole purpose and hope of his life seemed violently thrust aside, for the idle caprice of a man, who, he knew, set no real value on the prize he was thus coldly wresting from his grasp. All the pure and constant affection he had lavished on Bianca was suddenly turned to mockery, and, even in his own eyes, made him seem a blind, weak fool. The whole world, to his distempered fancy, seemed combined to turn all that had been generous and trusting, all his best qualities, to his own discomfiture.

The whole of that night he passed in a state of bitter anguish he had never known before.

His hope of winning Bianca had grown almost to a certainty;—he had felt sure, when all obstacles were removed, that such love as his was, must, in the end, win her; and now it was violently wrenched away, and



a blank despair, with which he could not struggle, invaded and took possession of his soul.

Lord Melton was not one of those who had ever played at being "sad as night;" he had never gone through any species of mental convulsion: he was a fine, sound, healthy-toned character, with a great deal of good sense, and a singleness of mind and motive, a directness of purpose, that had kept him clear of all metaphysical perplexities; he was always intensely in earnest, which gave a child-like directness to his whole character. His passion for Bianca was part of himself—no external circumstances could touch it—so long as Bianca remained what she was, so long, hopeless or not, would his affection for her remain unaltered. The fierce passions that were now roused within him—the dark, terrible despair that filled his soul, absolutely terrified him; he was, as it were, taken prisoner by the powers of darkness, and the sense of the reality of these powers crushed and bore him down; he was overpowered, and all idea of escape or struggle seemed vain.

As the night deepened, the dark aspect of his position became more exaggerated and fantastic; visions of Conrad and Bianca, in their home, where, by some mysterious power he also was condemned to dwell, haunted him; he seemed to have caught the trick of Conrad's way of speaking, and of Bianca's mode of thought, which served to give a colouring of reality to his most bitter and fanciful imaginings; he ceased to distinguish that it was he himself who embodied these fancies, and attributed them to Conrad, to Bianca;

his mind was dragged along by his imagination, as wretches of old were bound alive to the chariot of their victors, and dragged along the ground. After awhile all his perceptions became confused; he no longer discerned the objects around him. His valet found him delirious in the morning; his fever had returned with ten-fold violence, and it was many days before he recognised those around him. Having a fever and being delirious are easy and compendious phrases for those in health to use, and to them it conveys an idea of illness, perhaps of danger; but the fearful suffering from the visitation of those inhabitants of the realm of *madness*,—the intense reality of those delirious wanderings are never recognised.

“Deeds to be hid, which were not hid,
And all confused, I did not know,
Whether I suffered, or I did,
But all was guilt, and fear, and woe.”

At length Lord Melton was convalescent—his misery had become less dark—it was a suffering that had to be borne, and he recognised it as such.

Never, for an instant, did a doubt of how it would all end intrude upon him. It must be remembered, that he was entirely ignorant of the sad and fatal drama which had occurred during his absence, and which separated Conrad and Bianca, as by a gulf of fire, from all possible return to their old relations.

Still further was he from surmising the deep radical dissimilarity and discrepancy of character which every day developed between Bianca and Conrad. He did not know that Bianca, set free from her first en-

gement, and become accustomed to his refinement, and clear, keen judgment, had involuntarily erected himself into the standard by which she judged and measured all others. Bianca was not aware of it herself. Lord Melton did not know, either, that Conrad, broken and weary, had gone to Bianca, as the only living being who would endure the weight of his desolation, without any trace of his old passion, but with an immense and intuitive reliance on her indestructible affection, which no absence or ill treatment could efface. He did not know that it was an unconscious tribute to the worth and reality of her character : — and, above all, he was ignorant of that well-spring of tenderness and devotion, which, in a woman who has truly loved, survives all the more earthly and selfish emotions of passion. The living principle of love remains, when all passion is dead; and then it takes that deepest and broadest form of manifestation, which has its foundation woven into the very fibres of a woman's nature—the sentiment of maternity.

The sentiment of motherhood is latent in all women, and is a far stronger instinct than any passion for a lover. Let a man they care for ever so little come before them ill and suffering, and this instinct is instantly aroused—they are capable of any exertion or any sacrifice in his behalf: it signifies no sort of passion, and is compatible with utter personal indifference. When the need of sacrifice and exertion is gone by, the mere collapse from a state of occupation may set a woman thinking and dreaming, and the transition to

sentimentality is very short and easy ; but then it must be a new untried affection, and not, as in Bianca's case, a sentiment on each side thoroughly worn out. It was the sincerest tribute Conrad could pay to the intrinsic worth and nobleness of Bianca, to come to her with an unerring instinct that she would receive him ; and that no thought of her own dignity, or her own position, no self-love, or vanity of any kind, would hinder her.

But Lord Melton knew nothing of metaphysics, and still less of psychology ; neither, as we have seen, did he know any thing of the facts of the present case ; so, naturally enough, all the reason and judgment he endeavoured to bring to bear on the matter, only made the conclusion he arrived at more elaborately wrong.

If we would only condescend, when we are dealing with reasonably conscientious people, to believe what they tell us, we should generally arrive nearer the truth than by asserting our claim to shrewdness and cleverness by drawing our own inferences.

Lord Melton had hitherto implicitly believed Bianca in all she said. In this instance she had told him the exact truth about her own sentiments for Conrad. She could not in a letter venture on details, and Lord Melton fell bankrupt in faith, or, perhaps, we should say, there was a strong run on his jealousy, which did not allow his faith fair play, and he got into a most complicated state of misery accordingly.

The old theologians were quite right in making faith the primeval virtue of religion—the granite rock of its

foundation; it is a divine inspiration of heart, a clear insight into things, to which neither knowledge nor reason can reach; "it is high, they cannot attain unto it."

In Lord Melton's case faith was just the only virtue which could bring its own reward with it. There were many excuses for him, still excuses cannot redeem any one from the consequences of his own act, so Lord Melton was miserable all the same. When he was well enough to travel, he ordered his departure, but previously he wrote to Bianca, what he considered a highly proper and dignified letter. In it he remarked, somewhat sarcastically, on "her forgiving spirit," and said that women were fond of forgiving, and that "unless a man behaved like a scoundrel to them, he had no chance of rousing either their heroism or their generosity." He concluded rather grimly, with his best wishes for her happiness, "wherever and with whomsoever she might fix her choice!" He casually mentioned that he should travel for some time further, and omitted to furnish her with his address; a piece of dignity which at the time rather soothed him, though like all other dignity, it weighed heavily on him afterwards.

The next day he departed for Trieste, intending to make up his mind to his further destination when he arrived there.

Thus had a source of distrust and change crept into an attachment which he believed could never either die or fade until he himself should die. Between these two beings formed for each other, deeply and purely attached! For Bianca loved him, although her love was yet

like the young corn, hardly showing its gentle green above the ground, and she did not recognise it till it had struck its roots in her heart. The devil, who is the father and furtherer of all evil, the hater of unity, and the promoter of division, had succeeded in inserting a wedge of dissatisfaction and distrust between Lord Melton and Bianca !

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALL this while, Conrad continued to come frequently to Bianca; her calm, clear spirit soothed and sustained his weak and shattered soul; he fell into the habit of her society, whilst he continued to go to her house without giving a thought to the various rumours and interpretations that would be likely to arise from it. In effect a great deal of gossip was the result. Reports of all kinds were afloat, from the sedate paragraph in the daily papers, containing an official announcement of the "Hymeneal altar," down to passages in scandalous prints, of a far more questionable tendency: jokes, innuendoes, and circumstantial reports, containing every quality in the world except truth, were rife concerning her. Bianca could not be unaware of all this, neither was she so heroically superior to humanity as to be indifferent to what was said of her. No woman can be indifferent to evil reports of her good fame: but whilst Bianca's proud heart was blistered by finding that her name was running the gauntlet of all the infamous things that papers dependent on high-seasoned

scandal choose to invent, still she did not feel at liberty to draw back; she felt that without her, Conrad's life or reason would have failed, and she did not dare to let a thought of herself stand in the way. "I will live all that down hereafter," she said to herself, and in the meanwhile, neither by look nor sign, did she show to Conrad that she had the least cognisance of all the reports that had been raised. Conrad was too absorbed in his own feelings and his own sorrows, to think of any thing of the sort; if he had been aware of it, he had too much gentlemanly feeling, and too much real regard for Bianca, to have subjected her to it for any selfish consideration of himself.

Gradually, however, he came to her less frequently, and a change, the nature of which she could hardly have defined, came over him: at first she thought it was out of consideration to her; that he had become aware of the painful reports, and was endeavouring silently to extinguish them, and she felt pleased and grateful for his delicacy: but it was not long before she perceived that some other and far deeper feeling was at work within him, but as he shrank from all conversation that seemed to question him on that point, she was obliged to leave him to time.

One evening she was driving to a large dinner-party that had been made expressly for her. Many of her leading acquaintance—indeed, nearly all of them—had magnanimously countenanced her during the storm that had arisen, for which they one and all took great credit to themselves; never failing, however, when they mentioned the

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fact, to go over a tolerably long list of highly unexceptionable people who kept them in countenance. Bianca, in this, was very fortunate, for if only one had given way, it is a chance but that the whole circle would have gone, like a row of children's soldiers, of which, if you touch but one, they all fall in succession. Bianca, continued to be invited to the most unexceptionable dinings and tea-drinkings. She would much rather have stayed away from most of them ; but in this world it is one of the social rewards, and criterions of "perfect respectability," to receive admissions to the heaviest and solemnest reunions that can be drawn together ; whilst exclusion from them, is "to lie under the ban of the empire." As an estimable old lady once said to us, in the depth of a dreary party, "there would cease to be any reward for virtue, if we admitted both the good and the bad indiscriminately to our social intercourse."

But all this is an immense digression. Bianca was going, on the evening in question, to a most unexceptionable dinner party. There was a momentary stoppage in the street, as they were passing the doors of a dissenting chapel ; it was evidently some special occasion, for large bills were posted on the wall, and the name of some noted preacher was underlined. Bianca half smiled to see how extremes met, and that she and the preacher who would, no doubt, have considered her in a high state of reprobation, were both pressed on the public by the same mode. A crowd of people were pouring in, and a long string of sober-looking carriages

blocked up the way. Bianca looked out with some curiosity, and her eyes caught Conrad's, as he was turning to enter in. He seemed slightly annoyed at being recognised, but he immediately came to the carriage-window to speak to her.

"Where have you been all the week? and what is there here to-night to make such a concourse?"

"Are you then coming?" asked Conrad, with surprise.

"I? No; I want to know what it is at all."

"A very noted and eloquent preacher, and a very holy man," replied Conrad, gravely. "He is a new friend of mine."

"Well," replied Bianca, smiling, "do not let him make you forget your old ones."

The obstruction had now ceased, and the coachman drove on. Bianca thought with some surprise on the utter change that must have passed over Conrad to induce him to enter a dissenting meeting; he had never been at all addicted to going to church under any circumstances, and she had heard him express the most unmitigated contempt for all kinds of Methodists and Dissenters; but she had reached her destination, and had no further convenience for speculation. The evening passed over in stately decorum; but she learned casually that Lord Melton was in Vienna, and talked of making an excursion into the heart of Bohemia; that he had been in Vienna some weeks, and was going about a great deal into the very gayest society.

"How very strange that he has never written," thought

Bianca, and a vague discomfort of heart seized on her.

It seemed as if all her intelligence of Lord Melton's movements had been frozen up, and were suddenly set free like the words heard by Pantagruel and his companions; for the next day, a lady whom she had not seen before that season, called upon her. After some ordinary talk, the lady suddenly said, "By the way, I am not to forget to tell you, that my brother returned last week from Vienna, where he left your old friend, Lord Melton, who is become the gayest of the gay. Frank says that he goes into an immense deal of society, '*la crème de la crème*,' as Mrs. Trollope would say. He was said to be madly in love with the prima donna who is making such a sensation there, La Fornasari; who, by the way, Frank declares to be wonderfully like you; perhaps that may be the reason why Lord Melton has fallen in love with her. Frank can talk of nothing else but her beauty, and her wit, and her eccentricities; he says she does every day, the maddest things possible. I hope she will come here, I do so like people out of the common way."

"That depends on circumstances," said Bianca, laughing: "I know nothing so disagreeable as people who set up to be out of the common way; they are so prosaically fantastic, and as stupid as a labyrinth of which one knows every turn."

"Oh, but I assure you that La Fornasari is not one of that sort; she is as full of caprices as Undine before she got her soul, and has turned the heads of all the

young men in Vienna: she has ruined I do not know how many, and one young Polish nobleman has committed suicide on her account; he and his most intimate friend were both in love with her, and they came to a quarrel in consequence; there was to have been a duel (Frank was asked to be one of the seconds), but the night previous to the meeting, this poor young man shot himself, because he would not fight his friend. He left a most beautiful letter, Frank says, and a farewell waltz, which he dedicated to the Fornasari. His friend was so affected that he renounced her, and left the city the next day. It made a great sensation, and even the Fornasari was touched. She wrote some words to his air, and sang them herself; and made a vow, for his sake, to treat the very next lover who presented himself with great consideration. Lord Melton, seemingly, has been that one, for he came on with her directly afterwards. Frank brought me a copy of the air and the song. I will send them to you. Is it not a romantic history?"

"Highly so, indeed," replied Bianca, absently.

"The Fornasari will never keep Lord Melton long," said Conrad, who was present, "nor any one else, except those who follow her for the fashion. She has no more heart than a wicked fairy. If she came to England she would not succeed. I should be sorry to see one so utterly shameless even in the theatre. She is not fit to be spoken of."

Both Bianca and the lady looked surprised at this burst of energy. The lady, however, very shortly after rose to take her leave.

After she had departed, Bianca sat silently, making up a bouquet, which she was to wear in one of her scenes that evening. Conrad, who was sitting opposite to her, in a large chair, was struck with the peculiar expression of her countenance.

"I do not believe one word of all that chattering woman has said!" said he, suddenly. "Melton is not the one to get entangled with a bad meretricious woman; if your friend, who was speaking of her so lightly just now, had only known one half of what I do, she would be struck dumb with shame for her own levity."

"When did you know her?" asked Bianca.

"Some years ago, in Italy. She had then just made her *début*. I saw her the first night of her appearance; she certainly is as much like you in person, as she is different from you in mind."

"How was it you never mentioned her to me?"

"Bianca, if you only knew how loathsome those years of vanity and folly look to me now, you would not wonder that I shrink from recalling them; and yet, perhaps, the lengths and depths of sinfulness to which I have been permitted to go, were necessary to my complete humiliation, so that I might walk in penitence and self-abhorrence all my life, and, being made to see my own weakness, never trust in my own heart more."

"What a singular mode you have taken up of expressing yourself lately," said Bianca; "you seem to have quite a new way of thinking on all subjects."

"Not a new way, dear Bianca; I have only found, I

trust, the old way—the way that alone can conduct us to rest and peace.”

Bianca looked puzzled—but she had become accustomed to hear him speak mysteriously, and attached no particular importance to it: to-night, however, he seemed singularly grave and sad.

“You are not well, to-night, Conrad; you are not yet strong enough to venture into these crowded places at night. If you must go to church, go in the day time. By the way, you have not told me any thing of what you heard last night. Preachers have such power when they are eloquent. The pulpit, next to the press, is the most powerful instrument for influencing the minds of men, and in these days it has quite lost its power. Men have not now their hearts stirred within them from the pulpit, for they know beforehand all that the preacher is allowed to tell them.”

“I wish you would not speak in that way, Bianca, you do not know how it jars upon me. I consider that the man who is called to the ministry is called to a perilous honour, which places him higher than the angels—inasmuch as they only contemplate from afar the mystery of which he is a partaker.”

“You are growing quite a mystic!” said Bianca, winding a silver wire round her flowers: “look, are not they lovely?”

“To come from the fresh dew and the sunlight, where they were placed, to wither in the glare and heat of the theatre!” said he, looking mournfully at them and at her.

"And why not in the theatre as well as in a ball-room?" said Bianca, impatiently.

"Just as well and just as ill," said Conrad, gently; "both (to say the least of them), are equally vain and weary modes of existence for an immortal soul, which may be called at any moment to give in its account of 'the deeds done in the body.' If I felt regret that those fair perishing flowers should exhale their beauty and their perfume on such service, how much more great and terrible must seem to me the waste of you, with all your gifts of genius (given for far higher purposes), your noble faculties, and fine qualities, sacrificing night after night at the shrine of that world which rewards its votaries with bitterness and self-contempt, which lures them on, to leave them desolate and deceived at last! Believe me, dear Bianca, no worldly success, no earthly glitter, will ever satisfy a human heart—they all 'leave an aching void the world can never fill.'"

"Conrad, you are not well," said Bianca, kindly: "I am not going to argue with you, because what you say is quite true, only you seem to have taken it up in a strange perverted way; all you say about sacrificing to the world is very true, but it does not touch me: if one has work to do one must do it; no one worth the name of a rational being ever dreamed of living for the sake of amusing himself. If you tried my life for a month, you would find it real hard work, and no amusement at all."

"We do not understand each other, Bianca," replied Conrad; "some day it will perhaps be given you to know what I mean."

"Meanwhile, I must go to the theatre; my time is up. When shall I see you again?"

"Will you let me find you alone at eleven o'clock to-morrow, if I come?" asked Conrad.

"Make it ten o'clock, and then you will be sure to find me disengaged," said Bianca; "but if you are going home, shall I set you down?"

"No. I will be here at ten o'clock to-morrow."

Bianca was tying her bonnet, and did not remark the peculiar manner in which Conrad spoke; she nodded her head to him as she left the room, and desiring the coachman to drive very fast, as they were late, she sprang into the carriage.

Conrad remained where she had left him, apparently in bitter reflection. After awhile he started up like one stung with pain, and began to pace up and down the room. He stopped opposite the window which opened into the garden. It was a rich June evening; it was beginning to get dusk; a clear air tint that seemed like light from neither sun nor moon, but rather a transparent darkness, was spread over all. An expression of intense pain knitted his forehead.

"Thirty years old to-day!" exclaimed he, bitterly; "and this is all the good that my life has done me! utterly wrecked, utterly bankrupt! Sorrow I have

brought on all who have known me, bitter, never-ceasing remorse on myself! these are the goodly fruits of all the labours I have done under the sun!"

"Oh!" groaned he, as in utter anguish of spirit,—
"A lost life,—a lost life,—a lost life! to what purpose has been all this waste? Would to God that I had never been born!"

He clasped his hands above his head with a gesture of despair, and flung himself on the couch, which shook under his convulsive sobbings. After awhile they ceased, and he lay calmed and stunned; but then again, as impelled by some fury, he sprang from the couch, and began again to walk, with writhing steps, up and down the room.

"She has rest in the grave where I have laid her—where I have laid her. Yes, yes,—'Woe to thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled—and dealest treacherously and they dealt not treacherously to thee;—when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled—and when thou shalt make an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee.'"

He uttered these words in a dull, absent tone, like one speaking in a trance, or as if he had used a voice that was not his own.

"Aye," continued he, in a sharp, quick tone, "that is my doom; those are the words written against me, and none can take them away. None can take them away."

One of the servants entered hastily with a light; he had

heard a sound of talking, and knowing that his mistress was not at home he was alarmed. The sudden flashing of the lamp dazzled the eyes of Conrad, but he instantly recovered his self-possession, and coldly bidding the man bring his hat, he left the house.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE next morning, when Bianca descended to breakfast, she found Conrad already arrived ; but she started back at his strange aspect. He seemed utterly transformed, and for a second she hardly recognised him. He was dressed in a coarse iron-gray coat, made something like a Quaker's ; his linen, about which he had always been singularly fastidious, was of the very coarsest description, though perfectly white and clean. The whole of his dress, which was of the same iron-gray colour, seemed to have been made by a tailor who worked for artisans, so rudely and clumsily was it fashioned ; his shoes were thick, with nails in the soles, and coarse gray woollen stockings were seen above them.

"What on earth is all this about, Conrad ? What are you going to do with yourself at all in this guise ?"

"I have many things to say to you, Bianca, and we have no time to lose in idle surprise."

"Well, sit down and have some breakfast, and tell me what it is that has come upon you."

"A change of heart which will lead to a changed life, I would fain hope," replied he, gravely.

"You are speaking parables this morning," said she, trying to speak cheerfully, although a vague fear that his mind was getting unhinged oppressed her. "What shall I give you? I can recommend this chocolate; I had a quantity given me the other day. It is real Spanish."

"Thank you, no, I have already eaten; delicate food no more shall pass my lips."

Bianca, more and more surprised, began to sip her chocolate in uneasy silence, waiting for what he should next say. He did not speak, however, until she seemed to have finished her breakfast; he appeared to be considering in what manner he might best unfold his errand. At length he spoke, in a slow, grave voice.

"I am come to say farewell. I have not told you of my plans before, because I feared you would oppose me and harass me, by painful entreaties. You know all the folly of my past life—you know all the sin of it—you know the deep sin of all that lies on my soul. You have been very good to me; if you had not stood beside me in the beginning, I must have lost my reason, which has been spared me to work out my repentance. When that was done, your work ceased. You wished to have restored me to peace and comfort, but that was not for me. What have I done that I should ever know peace again? How could I live at peace, when she is in the grave, where I have laid her? But, Bianca, when I was helplessly crying 'What must I do to find peace?' I strayed by chance, not knowing whither I went (you see I was guided there by a power

not my own), into that chapel where you saw me entering the other night, and there I heard the message intended for me. I was told there that I had lived in self—that I had been dead in pleasure, dead in sin, and that there was a woe against all those who lived at ease, forgetting God—forgetting their brethren, the poor of this world. I knew I had done all this—I knew that I had bestowed on the needy none of the good things which I had thought mine, but of which I now heard I was only steward. I had kept all for myself, and my soul was weighed down with a curse. Oh, Bianca! you know not what it is to open your eyes suddenly, and see yourself utterly steeped and polluted with sin; to be obliged to abhor yourself more than the most loathsome thing you ever gazed on before;—but you must know what you are—it is the first step out of the abyss. I went to this chapel often; I heard what my soul thirsted to hear. You could not speak those words to me,—good, and kind, and devoted, you were still blind yourself. At length I spoke to the minister from whose lips I had first heard what I was. He showed me what I must do. The time past of my life shall suffice to have wrought folly—henceforth, I give myself to try to do good, as I have before done evil. Of myself, I can do no good thing; but help will be given me. I have sold all I possessed. Henceforth, I will wear no elegant clothes, I will eat no delicate food. I am the steward of my fortune—the possessors of it are all those who are in hunger,

and want, and wretchedness. I go to live amongst them, to minister unto them."

"But, Conrad, that is pure fanaticism, and nothing else. With your education, and your talents, to go to live entirely with rude, miserable wretches, is throwing yourself away; it is not using your gifts to advantage."

"Do not talk to me, Bianca, you know not what you say. I came to speak to you for the last time, therefore do not distract me from what I have to say. I would fain exhort you to quit your mode of life, for one better befitting an immortal creature; but I am not worthy to exhort you, you are far higher and better than I am; you will have another teacher sent to you. I have better wishes for you than you have for yourself; something tells me you will be led into the right way before you die. Now, Bianca, farewell,—God bless and reward you for all you have been to me."

His words choked him, and the tears streamed from his eyes, as he rose and took her hand.

"You have been a dear and precious friend to me," said he, in a voice broken with emotion; "forgive me all the sorrow I once brought on you."

"Surely you are not leaving me in this way, Conrad!" cried Bianca, fearfully,—“where are you going?—why are you going?—it must be some dream,” said she, with a bewildered look.

"It is no dream, Bianca,—the Conrad you knew is

dead.—The last day of my old life closed yesterday—to-day my new life has arisen.”

Bianca put her hands to her head; he took one of them, and said, gently, “ All this tumult and confusion will pass away. You should rejoice that I have found the true and the right way, and not sorrow that I have left my old life behind.”

“ But you will let me hear of you—you will come and see me, sometimes, at least?”

Conrad shook his head.

“ If ever you should be in want or sorrow, and should need me, then I would come:—a note to the minister of that chapel would always find me. Bianca, Bianca!” continued he, whilst his whole frame shook with the emotion he endeavoured to suppress, “ do not weep thus,—it breaks my heart to see you, for I cannot help you. You are good and kind, and would do all things for me; but you cannot help me; you cannot heal my wounded soul. I *must* go—‘ there is a task laid on me which I must fulfil.’ ”

He grasped both her hands in his, and with lips cold as death he pressed one long kiss upon her forehead.

“ I have left you, Bianca, some books and things that you will keep for my sake; and this I have brought you, too; you may keep it innocently: and now, farewell.

He laid a small morocco miniature case upon the table, and without again venturing to look at it, he left the room.

CHAPTER XX.

LORD MELTON, in the course of his wanderings, found himself at Trieste. He was undetermined as to his course ; he could not resolve to return to England, and he had put off making up his mind until he should reach Trieste. It was a relief to him, that, until he arrived there, he need decide on nothing ; he flung himself into the chapter of accidents, like one trying a "*sortes*" for something to determine his steps.

When he had settled himself at the hotel, he strolled towards the sea. He sat down, at length, listlessly enough, to survey the busy and vivid scene before him.

Suddenly a loud scream arose, from a group of children who were at play in a boat, which was secured to the shore by a cable twisted several times round a stone pillar. The boat had been swayed to and fro by the ripple of the waves, and their movements in their game, in a way that rendered it difficult for them to keep their balance. A dispute arose, and the biggest of the children seized another angrily ; in the

struggle, both fell over into the water, between the boat and the shore. Both disappeared, and were drawn by the waves under the boat. Before, however, Lord Melton could reach the spot, a young sailor who was lounging near, had dived like a water-dog after them, and in a few moments re-appeared with one of the children hanging, drenched and lifeless, across his arm. Lord Melton promptly relieved him from his burden, and he again disappeared beneath the surface to search for the other. This time he was less successful, and had to come up to take breath more than once. At length he appeared with the other; it had got entangled in a heap of sea-weed under the boat, and life was quite extinct. Lord Melton had carried his burden into a cabaret which stood near the quay, and was anxiously watching, beside the bed, the application of all the usual remedies, when the second victim of the casualty was brought and laid down beside the other, who was now beginning to show some symptoms of restored animation. All the bystanders assisted, and seemed instinctively to turn their eyes to Lord Melton for directions. He had with difficulty succeeded in calming the tumult and bustle of many advisers, and introduced orderliness into their proceedings.

"I fear," said he, putting his hand on the child's heart, "that this poor little thing is past our care; we can but try. Is that water still warm?"

An answer being returned in the affirmative, he directed one of the bystanders to place him in it, and

then turned to continue his cares to the one under his hands. On lifting the left arm to rub it more conveniently, he observed the mark of a small cross pricked on the inner side in blue ink, whilst several initials were printed in different colours at each of the angles. He had no leisure to bestow much attention upon this, as his ears were at that instant assailed by loud lamentations, mingled with the shrill clamour of many female voices, speaking at once in varied tones of deprecation and sympathy. The door of the apartment burst open, and a tall masculine looking woman, in the dress of a Hungarian peasant, violently disengaged herself from the grasp of her companions, who strove to soothe her, and rushed to the body of the dead child, which had been removed from the bath, and strained it frantically to her bosom.

“It is the mother—the mother of them both,” said some one in the group, in an almost unintelligible *patois*.

“Tell her,” said Lord Melton, “that she is losing the only chance of recovering her child. She must be quiet.”

A dozen voices were raised at once; the woman seemed not to heed, but sat with a stony gaze, rigidly clasping the form of her child.

Lord Melton, much affected, endeavoured gently to remove her, and to draw her attention to the one he had succeeded in restoring, but she pushed him angrily aside, and regarded the now calmly breathing form of

the rescued one with a shudder of despair and affright, whilst she fiercely resisted his attempt to disengage the child she still convulsively clutched.

"They were both your children," said Lord Melton, "and you must be thankful for the one preserved to you."

She stared at him wildly, without understanding a word he said.

The voices of several women were again raised to enforce his words.

"It is false, it is false," said she, wildly: "this one is my son; what is the other to me? I have lost my soul for it, and now it has cost me my son."

"She is mad, the poor Monica!" said a woman, compassionately; "the one that lies dead was her favourite; she never favoured the other, she would not have cared had the other been the victim."

"I am not mad, I tell ye," cried the mother, fiercely: "this one is my child—my precious son; the other—how should I know who owns it—it has brought evil on me from the beginning:" and muttering still wilder words, she went off in a violent hysterical seizure, and had to be removed to a distant room.

Lord Melton's patience was at last rewarded by seeing his little patient fall into a peaceful slumber. With some difficulty he continued to clear the room, and remained still watching beside the bed. He might have sat there about half an hour, when a servant returned, saying that the woman, the mother of the children, earnestly desired to see him.

"Is she better?" asked Lord Melton—"this little fellow is doing well."

"His mother rambles and talks wildly—it seems to be little she cares for this one; she calls the other her child: but she asks to see you, and will not rest until your lordship is good enough to humour her."

"By all means I will go; and you will see that the doctor and the landlord understand that I am responsible for all expenses, and so forth. The sailor who jumped into the water after him, should have something; but that I will see to myself. Remain here beside the child until I return."

Lord Melton was shown into a miserable garret in the auberge, and on a low pallet the wretched woman lay. A priest was beside her, and several women were standing round the bed, which was covered with marks of blood: in her paroxysm of grief she had broken a blood-vessel, and she seemed on the point of death.

"Here is the good English prince who has saved your child," said one of the women.

"Let him come close, that he may hear me," said she, in a whisper.

"Your son is alive, and out of all danger, and will be at play again before evening," said Lord Melton, cheerfully.

"I am dying," said the woman, "with a deadly sin on me,—will you help me to lighten the curse?"

"I will do every thing possible," replied he, kindly; "but you are not in a state to talk."

"Yes, I am; every body stay to hear what I say:—

that child is not mine—I was persuaded to keep him—the priest will tell you all how it was. You are rich; you can go where you will; you can find its mother, and deliver me from her curse.”

The woman spoke in gasps, and in a patois hardly intelligible; but her eye was fixed upon him in an agony of entreaty, anxiety, and terror, that was terrible to endure.

“My good woman, what can I do? You are deceived in my power to help you.”

The woman groaned, and with a look of despair to the priest, she said, “Father, tell me how to make restitution—do not let me die under its mother’s curse.”

The priest said a few words which he intended to be consoling, but they had no effect: the poor creature sprang up in bed, and seizing Lord Melton’s arm, said, with a shriek that vibrated through the whole house, “Promise, promise;” a violent fit of coughing drowned her voice, and a dark stream of blood gushed from her lips; her head fell back—all attempts to restore her were in vain: after a few moments’ struggle all was over, and she lay dead before them.

Lord Melton had never seen any one before at the moment of death, and the horrors of the deathbed he had just witnessed were an appalling addition to the thrilling mystery which invests the event, even when the transit is most peaceful. He felt as if under the influence of a terrific dream, from which he could not deliver himself.

“You are unequal to this sight, my lord,” said the

priest, compassionately, "you had better retire, whilst we perform the last offices:—at another time I will explain the miserable woman's words."

He gently led him outside the door, and guided him down the rickety stairs to the open air, which somewhat relieved the deathly faintness that oppressed him.

"I must go now, my lord, but I will see you this evening, if you will allow me."

"You will find me at the Golden Lion," replied Lord Melton, giving him his card—"and will you see that the rescued child wants for nothing," added he, placing a sum of money in the old man's hand.

"Be quite sure that every thing needful shall be done;—can I see you at five o'clock if I call?"

"At any hour that will suit your other engagements."

"At five, then, I will not fail to be with you," replied the priest, courteously, as he turned to enter the auberge.

Lord Melton walked back to his hotel, shocked and stupified by the events of the morning.

As he entered, a travelling carriage drove up, and a gentleman in deep mourning, evidently an Englishman, alighted.

Pre-occupied as he was, Lord Melton could not avoid remarking the look of deep settled grief which rested on his countenance.

"Do you happen to know who that gentleman is that arrived just now," asked he of his valet.

"His name is Bryant, my lord."

CHAPTER XXI.

LORD MELTON was sitting at the open window of his apartment in the hotel, which commanded a view of the sea. He was smoking with great diligence. Of all human inventions smoking is the greatest resource for any sort of perplexity; Sancho Panza's benediction on him who invented sleep, may be reiterated with emphasis on the man who invented smoking—it calms his irritation, it soothes his sorrow, it unravels his perplexities, it inspires his genius; and difficulties which seemed impossible at the beginning of a cigar, grow to look quite tame and manageable at the end of it. Lord Melton had met with an incident that might either lie dormant for ever, or like the grain found in the sarcophagi of mummies, be destined after years of darkness and oblivion, to germinate a preternaturally abundant harvest of adventures. He was interrupted by the old priest, who came punctually to his appointed time. In his hand he led the child, which had now quite recovered from its accident, but was crying bitterly after its mother and little brother.

Lord Melton received the old man very cordially, and comforted the child with some sweetmeats.

"What is to be done with him?" said he. "Having saved his life I feel bound to do something towards making it worth his living."

"I have been myself thinking of the same thing," replied the old man; "poor little fellow, he has already had many vicissitudes. I have written down the confession of her who died this morning, along with the dates, which may be useful. So many extraordinary coincidences occur in life, and we are so often brought in contact with people strangely connected with events, from which they seemed for ever divided by accidents of distance, time, and country, that there is no saying what influence you may exercise over that young creature's destiny. I do not believe that we any of us stand alone in the world; we are all more or less connected with each other, and whoever we have once known, never passes away from us entirely; incidents are continually occurring to bring them again across our path."

"I have often thought so," replied Lord Melton; "but it seemed too vague a fancy to make a maxim about, or to petrify into a fact."

"Yes," said the priest, "it requires some courage to stake an action on the faith of that which is not seen. We call the whole human family our 'brothers' as a *façon de parler*, but most of us only believe in the connexion we may chance to make with those who cross our path; we cannot risk an action on the faith of that bond of unity, which lies underneath all

apparent diversities of interests, nations, and races. A practical faith in the Providence which gathers together in one all the families of the earth, seems to you enthusiasm or perhaps insanity."

"Well," said Lord Melton, good-humouredly, "whether I accept your theory or not, at least I am not going to abandon this little one so strangely thrown in my way,—and to come back to the first question, what had better be done with him?"

"The superior of the monastery of St. Lazarus would receive and educate him; but I am too poor to pay the fee."

"That is very easily settled," said Lord Melton, greatly relieved by this simple solution of the question.

"Now you see how we are all fitly joined together," said the old man, smiling; "what to you seems so easy, to me was an insuperable obstacle. Men would fail in nothing, if they would only work together."

Lord Melton did not know what to make of the priest and his childish belief in his own theories. He inquired where this monastery of St. Lazarus was; and hearing that it lay near, he proposed to walk thither at once, and arrange the business; to which the old man assented, and they accordingly set off.

"I am only remaining in this place until to-morrow," said Lord Melton, as they went along; "and according to your theory, I have been brought here for this purpose."

"Who knows," replied the priest, "why you have been brought? It is not in man that walketh, to direct his steps. We never know what we do at the time when we are doing it: we seem to be following our own business or our own pleasures—and when the event is completed those are proved to have been but mere tools."

By this time they had reached the monastery. The business that brought them was soon despatched. Lord Melton paid a sum that would maintain the child until he was old enough to be put to a trade, and the old priest promised to take him the next morning.

The next morning also saw Lord Melton start for Vienna.

He had many friends in Vienna, most of them in distinguished positions in society, so that on his arrival, he was welcomed into all the fashion and gaiety going about at that season.

After his desultory, wandering, and yet lonely life for so many months, he was surprised to find how extremely pleasant all the dissipation proved in which he found himself thus suddenly involved.

In fact, he had had quite enough of his own company; and sociability is a much deeper feeling in human nature, than any sort of misanthropy, sulkiness, or exclusiveness in which even an Englishman may please to rejoice. For a season one may wish to escape the sight and sound of our species, but after awhile one is always very glad to go back to them.

Two nights after his arrival, one of his acquaintance

burst into his room to carry him off to the opera. It was the first night of the Fornasari's appearance in "Semiramide," and tickets were worth more than their weight in gold.

Lord Melton was startled at the name; it was precisely the one that figured in the narrative the old priest had given him.

Of course he offered no objection, and they went accordingly. The house was filled to the ceiling with an enthusiastic audience, but Lord Melton did not go with the multitude. He saw in the Fornasari a beautiful woman, who at first sight startled him by her resemblance to Bianca; but it produced a singularly unpleasant effect upon him; her bold, insolent, defiant look, for an instant almost shook his faith in Bianca. It did not seem possible for them to be so much alike and yet different. Even her singing and acting disgusted him. She had a magnificent voice, and showed flashes of genius in her personation of the character, but all was marred by the constant intrusion of herself. Music, singing, acting, all seemed nothing but so many vehicles for the glorification of *herself*. It was no realisation of Semiramis, the demi-god, the wondrous, half-fabulous Queen of Babylon; but an intrusive manifestation of an unmentionable woman. At least so Lord Melton thought, until the scene with Arsace, after she discovers that he is her son; and then there was a touch of deep feeling and reality, which contrasted strangely with the meretricious character of the former portion of her performance.

"How do you like her?—what do you think of her? does she not realise your idea of a syren?" were questions that burst like a waterfall over the ears of Lord Melton as soon as the curtain fell.

"To me she seems perfectly hateful," said he; "and I could not have conceived it possible that any one so beautiful, so gifted, and with a voice I never heard approached (much less equalled), could produce such an utterly disagreeable impression. She did not suggest the idea of a syren to me in the least, but something far less classical; all the time she was singing with that fierce, cruel, insolent, and yet enticing look, I could think of nothing but Delilah beguiling Samson to betray him to the Philistines."

"It is her receiving night, and I was about to ask you to go there with me to supper, but with those sinister notions you will hardly like to venture," said his friend.

"Do you mean to say that you could present me?" asked Lord Melton.

"Decidedly, if you like to come."

"Well, then, she certainly is a phenomenon I should like to view more nearly; so if you think I shall be received, I should be very glad to go."

"You are an Englishman, and will be received quite well, there is no fear. She has a great desire to sing in London, and so is very civil to all the Englishmen who come in her way, as a matter of speculation; but come along, for we shall be late."

As they went along Lord Melton said,

"I should think that woman must have a history—where does she come from?—who is she?"

"Oh," replied the other, "those sort of women have seldom any antecedents worth knowing.—They drudge till they come into notice, and then one is too much taken up with the present to go back to the past. I can tell you nothing about her, except that she has turned the heads of the whole city, and that men ruin themselves, make fools of themselves, and now and then shoot themselves, to her great glorification, for she does not in the least distress herself about those accidents: and yet, now and then she shows a gleam of feeling that astonishes one, and makes one wonder whether she is the frivolous, heartless, creature she seems; in fact, she is an enigma beyond my power to solve, and that, I suppose, keeps up the enthusiasm about her: but here we are arrived—now for your reception!"

They were admitted without delay, and were conducted by a servant in gorgeous livery up a handsome, well-lighted staircase, to an anti-room, filled with all sorts of curiosities, bijouterie, pictures, statues, bronzes, porcelain, &c., &c.; they had no time to stay to examine them, as they were immediately ushered into a smaller room adjoining, where about a dozen men of different ages were assembled.

The room was hung in panels of rose-coloured silk, with a wreath of gold flowers in the centre of each:—no expense or luxury had been spared, and yet the result was rather whimsical than tasteful, and Lord Melton

fancied it bore the impress of the character of its possessor. The room was neither Gothic, nor Grecian, nor Chinese, nor Medieval, nor of the Renaissance; and yet it was a mixture of them all, and every style had sent some object to represent it. One or two immense mirrors were let into the wall, so that in the daytime those presenting themselves for admission could be perceived and recognised.

The room was lighted with a profusion of wax lights, but shaded into a pleasant silvery radiance; the atmosphere was heavy with perfume that arose from a stand of flowers, which in that room seemed not without a certain meretricious look, as if they had become demoralised from their associations; in fact, they had composed the innumerable wreaths and bouquets which had been flung to her on the stage the previous evening. Card-tables were laid out in different parts of the room, for the Fornasari was said to be addicted to high play, amongst her other virtues.

Lord Melton was presented by his companion to the guests already assembled, who were mostly men of some consideration.

"I ought to have told you that there is always play after supper, but you need not join unless you like."

The Fornasari just then entered, and prevented the need of a reply: she was plainly and quietly dressed, and was accompanied by her sister, a pretty enough insignificant young woman, who was her *dame de compagnie*. She seemed tired and out of spirits, and made a much better impression on Lord Melton than he would

have believed possible five minutes previously. She received him with something almost like kindness, and placed him beside her at supper, which was announced almost immediately in an adjoining apartment.

Every thing was served in excellent style, and the conversation was loud and lively; but the Fornasari sat very absent and silent, joining only by fits and starts in what was said.

"This is one of your days for being in low spirits, madame; one of the eclipses with which you shroud your brightness in pity to your worshippers," said one of the guests, a fat middle-aged man, with an air of faded gallantry. •

She did not take the trouble to reply; but her sister, with a half officious, half pert air, said,

"Ah, yes, that makes you value us more when we shine; it is only politic to be invisible sometimes."

"If we have finished supper, let us go back to the other room," said the Fornasari, abruptly. "Do you play?" asked she, turning to Lord Melton.

"Not unless I am wanted to make up a game."

"Ah, that is right; then you will sit and talk to me. I shall not play, either.—Count de Rossi, you must have your revenge another night."

The company dispersed themselves about the room, and made up their parties to the different tables. The Fornasari seated herself on an ottoman, and signed to Lord Melton to sit beside her.

She began to converse with him about his travels, and showed a degree of shrewdness and good sense in

her observations that surprised him. Afterwards she asked him many questions about England, about the theatre, and about the estimation in which performers were held.

"But I suppose," said she, bitterly, "that there, as elsewhere, people think it due to themselves to *exploiter* all the beauty, genius, or powers of pleasing, possessed by those whom evil stars have doomed to live by them, and afterwards to despise those who have amused them, with all the majesty of stupidity. Do you know, I have often envied the power exercised by stupidity; it has a weight far beyond that of genius. Genius may break its heart in the endeavour to infuse a spark of sensibility or sympathy with its efforts; and stupidity can stand unmoved, unruffled, utterly invulnerable, and coming off decidedly the best in the encounter. 'Against stupidity the gods themselves fight in vain;' and, as for me, who am a mere mortal, I am absolutely frightened at its leaden superiority to all my genius,—such a strange mystery attaches to silence and stupidity!"

Lord Melton laughed. "Is that intended as a tribute to my English impassivity?" said he.

"No; it is a tribute to truth, for once."

"Your perception of the dignity of stupidity, in your dazzling position," replied he, "looks somewhat like the taste of a monarch for black bread and a peasant's hovel. You would both be satisfied with a short life. Those once accustomed to a brilliant position can never desire another, except as a carnival disguise."

"Yes," said the Fornasari, with something like bitterness, "my life is like the last scene of a pantomime, or a display of fireworks; there is a very flat and smouldering result—but the audience will have dispersed before then."

"This is the anniversary of a great sorrow," continued she, after a pause; "several years have passed since it befel me; but, at these times, all this glare and noise is very sickening. You have a kind face, and it is a comfort to me to see you here to-night."

Lord Melton said something about his good fortune in having been presented to her, and turned the conversation on her performance of the "Semiramide." "I was startled," said he, "in that scene with your son. You invested it with a feeling I could not explain. What was your idea in it, if I may ask?"

"ENVY," replied the Fornasari, abruptly. She rose as she spoke, as though to break off the conversation; and, approaching one of the tables where two of her guests were playing *écarté*, she staked a heavy wager on the one who was losing. It was getting late, and Lord Melton rose to leave, feeling much more in charity with his hostess than he would have believed possible two hours previously. "Ah! you are going," said she, turning her head towards him. "Well, I hope you will come again."

Lord Melton bowed; and then he added, involuntarily, "Will you give me a private audience to-morrow if I come?"

"I will," replied she. "Be here to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and I will see you."

Several things had struck Lord Melton as coinciding with the facts mentioned in the priest's note; and, at least, it was worth while to try whether the Signora Fornasari in his note, was the same person as La Fornasari of the evening before. Punctually, at the appointed time, he presented himself at the gate, and was admitted by the *concierge* without hesitation. He was shown into the room he had before seen: the daylight came softened down to a *tendre jour*, through blinds of rose-coloured crape. The Fornasari herself, in a most becoming morning-dress, was trying over an air in a new opera, which was shortly to appear. She ceased at his entrance.

"All you Englishmen are punctual," cried she, gaily. She seemed quite to have lost the depression of the evening before, and Lord Melton began to feel a return of the disgust with which she had at first inspired him. He even thought that his poor little half-drowned protégé would be better without a mother to the end of his life, than to be restored to the arms of such a questionable parent. She saw that she failed in producing an effect; that the good feeling with which he regarded her the evening before had passed away; and like a woman accustomed to success, she determined not to let him depart until she had recovered her ground. She was one of those women cursed with gifts which result in the ruin of themselves, and the misery of those who come under their spell. She had a passion for subjugating all who came within her reach, for the gratification of her own vanity; and for this miserable result she displayed powers almost mi-

raculous. She seemed to know every turning and fold of the human heart; to carry in her own nature the key of every different character. She could turn and govern men at will. Had she been a noble woman, she might have made them into heroes; as it was, she was contented with making them fools, for her sake. She was so largely endowed and organised, that in herself she seemed the epitome of the whole sex; but all her gifts were limited and vulgarised by being centred in herself, and by the total absence of all elevation of thought or feeling. She had tasted the intoxication of the subtle sovereignty which women like her can exercise, and to hold her empire to the latest moment was her only aim. She saw Lord Melton did not admire her levity of tone, and fell gently back into the half-confidential melancholy of the evening before; which, after all, had for once been a genuine expression of the feeling of the moment: but mobile as she was, the same mood never lasted an hour.

“It is the misfortune of women like me,” said she, in reply to some slight compliment from him, “that those who come near us never seem to see any thing worth respecting; and that makes one feel towards them as if they were natural enemies, and show them no mercy. Why should one trust them, or treat them well?—they would only make one suffer for it. You have some feeling, some humanity in you; but it makes me mad with contempt and hatred to see the crowd of those who come round me, for the gratification of their

own egoism and vanity. They get what they can from me; and if my beauty were to fade, or my voice to fail, they would allow me to sink down to straw and a hospital without remonstrance or regret, if they only found another who could fill my place. Do you think that I am blinded by all this luxury and adulation that surrounds me? Do you think I do not know that they are all fairy gifts, which when breathed on (as they will one day be) by age or sickness, will vanish, and I shall find myself like an awakened dreamer, in rags and starvation in a garret. It is written on every panel in the walls—there is not a day in which it does not cross my fancy;—the thought is like a familiar spirit always within call. It will be my fate. I am not a coward to fear it, but it gives a zest to the present moment and keeps enjoyment from palling. What should men like you know of the fierce intoxication contained in the exhortation of ‘Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.’ ”

“The fate you sketch,” replied Lord Melton, “seems to me much less fearful than the state of mind you describe. Power is power, and may be turned to one purpose as well as another. If you were to use the influence you sway to a better purpose, the consequences would not be so bitterly reckless as you represent them. On your own showing, what you call ‘your fate’ is of your own working.”

“Oh, I know I am a gilded Ishmaelite,” said she, laughing; “but I will not fall, until I become old and

ugly, and have lost my energy, and then it will not much signify what befalls me. We all change so much that what seems very terrible at one time, is quite supportable at another; there is always room to walk upright under troubles that at first seemed as if they must crush us to death. Besides," added she, speaking in a tone of natural feeling, "one sometimes has had a great sorrow, after which we feel quite sure nothing again can ever give us any pain; we have endured the worst and live. But I can keep you no longer now, for I am wanted at the opera."

"I have already intruded too long," said Lord Melton; "but it struck me that you might be the person referred to in this memorial; if so, you will find information that highly concerns you; if not, pardon my officiousness."

He placed the paper on the table and departed. The Fornasari sat for a moment after he left the room like one buried in painful thought; then negligently taking up the paper, she began to read; but her negligence was soon changed into the most vehement agitation. An expression of fear and hope was in her face, her lips were apart and colourless, her eyes dilated, and a nervous spasm shook her frame. Her sister came running in alarm, having heard her sobs of hysterical weeping in the next room.

"You will never be able to sing if you sob in this manner, Julietta," said her sister; "what has come to you?"

“ Read, read,” cried the Fornasari.

That same night there was a terrible *émeute* at the opera. The Fornasari had departed, and no one could tell whither.

CHAPTER XXII.

SUCH was the substance, from which the reports that reached Bianca, of Lord Melton's intimacy with the singer, had their origin. It would have annoyed him excessively to have known that his name was mixed up with a style of woman he detested so thoroughly. He felt very sorry for the Fornasari—sorry to see so many good gifts laid waste—but he was too much of an Englishman in all his notions to entertain any philosophical charity for her, and he did not feel called upon to exert himself to rouse the small leaven of good which even he thought he discerned, amid all her sins, against the laws of good morals and good taste. Indeed, the judgment human beings pass on each other, has often more to do with the outrage offered to the idiosyncracies of personal taste and feeling, than to their dereliction from abstract principles of morality.

When people commit sins with which we individually have no sympathy, and which press inconveniently upon us, we are apt to give them over to absolute reprobation ; they are utterances of humanity

we do not comprehend. But if it were possible that any one man should arise, who could thoroughly know all that was in man, we should be struck dumb with the immense tolerance, sympathy, power of reconciliation, and of guiding to good, which he would manifest for all orders and degrees of men—from the Pharisee, with his broad phalactery of respectability, down to the most hardened outcast of Norfolk Island, who has sinned himself down to the level, and almost to the likeness, of a brute. Meanwhile, it is a great comfort to believe that there exists a higher judgment, which will revise the rash and compendious mode by which so many are given calmly over to reprobation by their fellows. This, however, is a digression.

Lord Melton continued in Vienna, going, as has been represented, a great deal into society. He gradually grew into a more healthy frame of mind—he was carried out of himself and his own sensations. He began to feel that he had no right to allow even the overthrow of his dearest hopes to engross his thoughts. He had preached this doctrine to his conscience often enough, but now he began to feel and believe in it, and to make a strong determination to act upon it. He was one of those deep, constant, Othello-like natures, which form but few attachments, and those few are so interwoven with the very stuff out of which their life is formed, that when one of them is violently broken, their whole nature receives a shock, from which it slowly and with difficulty (if ever) recovers. It is almost impossible for them to replace an old

affection with a fresh one. To many it may seem a very small thing which had befallen Lord Melton, and it may seem foolish and weak that it should have so completely prostrated him ; but that which is only a scratch to one man, proves a mortal wound to another. After the first natural pang of wounded self-love had passed away, his affection for Bianca re-asserted itself in its full force. He did not judge her conduct, he did not even blame her ; he recognised, in her indestructible affection for Conrad, a nature like his own. He only felt a sorrowful satisfaction (which no one can call selfish) in the conviction that she would now need more than ever the brotherly, disinterested affection he had vowed her—for no amount of faith, hope, or charity, could enable him to believe that Conrad was either worthy of her, or sensible of her worth. He vividly foresaw the bitter disappointment in store for her, when she should discover the cold limitations of his nature, which she had mistaken and revered as proofs of his power to guide her.

It was an immense relief to him when the sentiment of his own self-love was silenced, and he had given up all thought of his own dignity. A great part of his suffering had arisen from the struggle between his pride and his affection, the intense yearning to forgive Bianca the slight she had offered him, and to care for her as of old, with the harassing sense of his own discomfiture, which seemed to prescribe a dignified estrangement from her for the future, as his only possible course. But now that he had succeeded in imposing silence on

his wounded *amour propre*, and was restored to unity within himself, he felt almost happy again, and able to bear his disappointment like a man. He determined to return to England very shortly. He was first to make an excursion into Bohemia. He had heard some curious details of a singular race of people inhabiting a wild and almost unknown district; about whose roads, and inns, and things to be seen, no guide-book had as yet been written. He felt a strong desire to explore them, and being so far on his way, it seemed too fair an opportunity to be lost, after which he felt fully determined to return home and do his duty as an English nobleman and landholder, and no longer discharge them through his steward.

All this time the *habitués* of the opera were in despair, at the prolonged and unexplained absence of the Fornasari. The whole public came to a sense of its insulted majesty—"by disappointment every day beguiled;" and it magnanimously determined to crush her under the weight of its just displeasure, in case she should now be even ready to return. Apparently she knew her own power better than the public did; for one night she suddenly reappeared more resplendent than ever, singing and acting as she had never done in her life before. Till she came back to them, the audience had hardly realised the loss they had sustained; the sense of their dignity was not proof against the sense of their own amusement; they allowed her to proceed, and at the close of the opera sealed her pardon by calling her

before the curtain, when their gracious forgiveness was turned into enthusiasm by the graceful air with which she seemed to thank them at once for their applause and their forbearance.

That same day, Lord Melton received two notes, one from the old priest at Trieste, informing him that the child, whose life he had saved, had been given up to a lady who had claimed him, having given reasonable proofs of being his mother, and appealing to Lord Melton whether that did not convince him of the truth of his doctrine, that we were all one family on the earth. The other note was from the Fornasari herself, overflowing with gratitude to him for his humanity to her child, and requesting him to come and see her very soon.

Lord Melton was on the point of entering the carriage to leave Vienna, and he did not feel tempted to delay his departure, to pay a visit to receive thanks; he therefore wrote a polite and stately note, excusing himself from obeying her commands. He had an indescribable sort of spite against this woman, for reminding him so disagreeably of Bianca; she seemed an odious libel upon her, both in her life and profession.

But the chapter of accidents and adventures having once opened on Lord Melton, did not seem destined to close very soon.

At the close of the first day's journey, the road, which led through a wild and thinly-peopled district, turned off through a dark wood, principally of pine trees; large masses of rock, covered with long moss, lay scat-

tered about on each side of it, and piled up in all directions, bearing witness to some long past convulsion of nature. The fading daylight with difficulty pierced the close shade of the trees. Lord Melton desired the postillions to hasten their pace, which they actually did, and in consequence came up with a smart shock against some dark object which was lying across the road, and which proved to be a travelling-carriage that had been overturned. A German postillion, whose natural amount of stupidity had been increased and perfected by the black beer he had obtained that day, was helplessly trying to disengage the passenger within the vehicle, and whose groans proved him to be suffering severely. A couple of horses, with their broken traces still hanging to them, were lazily picking what fodder they could find on the road side.

Lord Melton succeeded in calming the torrent of objurgation which arose from his own postillion, at this untoward event, for the postillion of the other carriage was too much stupified to reply. He then got out of his own vehicle to offer his assistance.

Pushing aside the drunken man, he addressed the person whom he presumed to be inside, in French, which was replied to, but with a decidedly English accent.

"I think we are countrymen," said Lord Melton; "I rejoice to have come up at such a conjuncture. How can I next assist you?"

"By getting me out of this place if you can," replied

the other. I am much bruised, and my arm is caught on the other side. Have you any people with you to help?"

The Englishman spoke in evident pain, though there was a singular composure in his manner. Lord Melton was shocked to find that his arm, which had been placed out of the window of the carriage, in the attempt to open the door at the moment it overturned, had been caught beneath it, and though fortunately a small piece of rock had left a space between the side of the carriage and the ground, still there was reason to fear the limb would be severely crushed.

With the assistance of his own postillions, Lord Melton succeeded in liberating him from his painful position. On emerging from the depths of the carriage he recognised the Englishman whom he had seen at the door of the hotel at Trieste, who was really no other than Bryant. He was in a state of extreme suffering; his left arm was broken, and he was, besides, so much bruised as to be hardly able to stand.

"You had better proceed at once with me, Mr. Bryant, without waiting for the assistance your messengers will bring; they will contrive to get the carriage along, somehow, and you ought not to lose any time in getting your bruises looked to."

Bryant started at hearing himself addressed by his own name, in the middle of that wild, desolate place, and nearly in the dark besides.

"You have proved yourself a friend in need," said he: "I did not expect you were an acquaintance, also."

If I could take out my writing-case, I should be inclined to follow your advice, but it contains papers I dare not leave out of my sight."

"We will get out the case if you will trust us,—but—"

Bryant, who had supported himself with difficulty, tottered a few steps, and would have fallen, had not one of the postillions caught him in his sturdy arms.

"Carry him, and place him carefully into the other carriage," said Lord Melton, "whilst I look for the writing-case."

As they had not been able to lift the carriage, the search was neither easy nor successful; he looked everywhere, but the case was not to be found, and fearful of keeping the injured man longer without medical assistance, Lord Melton was obliged to order the carriage to proceed; he left his own servant with strict injunctions not to permit any thing to be touched or removed, and to bring the broken vehicle along as soon as possible.

The pain of removal had roused Bryant from his insensibility, but he still seemed unconscious of every thing but his own suffering. It was not until he had been laid in bed at the small miserable inn, and his arm set, that he asked after his writing-case, and manifested the warmest anxiety when he found it had not been brought. It was almost necessary to keep him in bed by force.

"I will go back, and superintend the removal of the case from the chaise, if you will only tell me whereabouts you placed it."

"In the back of the carriage—it is a small panel

that opens with a spring; if you will add this to the other favours you have already conferred, it would be a great comfort to me to know you were on the spot, and that no one had access to the inside but yourself."

To calm his anxiety, Lord Melton good-naturedly complied, and turned out in search of the carriage, which he found in the same place, the assistance having not arrived.

This time he was more successful, and securing the case, and some books that were also with it, he began to retrace his steps a second time;—the distance was not more than a league. On arriving, he found Bryant in a high fever, and quite delirious. He addressed Lord Melton as "Conrad," and ordered him to leave the room. He raved a great deal about "Alice." That which no power on earth would have induced him to mention to his dearest friend, he, in the defenceless state of delirium, talked about incessantly. Lord Melton watched beside his bed all night, and in those unconnected wanderings he found the solution of all that had been tormenting and perplexing himself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN the meanwhile Bianca was fulfilling her vocation, but not at all with satisfaction to herself. She was still engrossed with her art. But other feelings had taken possession of her, and prevented its being the only object of her life. The old actor was quite right in saying, that "when women got hold of a love affair they made that their business, and let every thing else go to the devil." It is a sad truth, not at all creditable to the sagacity of the female mind ; but, alas, so it is ; and Bianca, with all her strength, was only a partial exception to the general rule. Lord Melton's continued silence perplexed her. She had a profound consciousness that she had not behaved too well to him, and she began to feel terribly afraid he had succeeded in regaining his liberty, at the very moment when she was better disposed to him than she had ever been before. Such is the perversity of human affairs. The kindness, and tenderness, and more than a mother's thoughtfulness, which he had always shown her, and which she had at the time considered matters of course, became now to be looked back upon as things vainly and

mournfully precious ; which she had allowed to pass away from her, unconscious of their value, and with a stupid indifference.

She had been much worn by her attachment to Conrad. She had been obliged to supply affection both for him and herself also. There had been nothing reciprocal in it; or, at least, she had given so much more than she had received, that a weariness of soul remained, which made her shrink from all violent or strong emotion. She fancied that she had become indifferent for ever; when, in fact, she was only gathering strength, breaking up the ground for a calmer and more lasting attachment, that should embrace the whole life; in the existence, and under the broad shadow of which she might dwell at rest and peace; in which she might put her whole trust, without needing to feel anxiety as to the meaning of each word and look, clinging with painful tenacity lest she should be thrown off, to fall, she knew not whither. She needed to dwell under the influence of a large, calm, loving nature, which should, as it were, sheathe her more vehement and impetuous spirit. She now awoke to the consciousness of all that Lord Melton would have been to her. But he had come before her when she had no strength to accept the love he offered—like water found too late, by wretches perishing in the desert of thirst. Now, when she would have stretched out her hand to the blessing, it appeared to have passed, and she was smitten with “that curse of life—too late.”

Every day now increased her intense desire to regain

the friend she had allowed to depart. She reproached herself for her former coldness and indifference, as if, at the time, she could have been other than she had been. Every day the recollection of the time when he had been her friend, came to her, as dreams of a golden time, which had passed away because she did not know its worth.

She endeavoured to give her whole soul more and more to her art ; tried to make herself believe, that to live a calm, self-sustained existence, dedicated like that of a priestess, cold, strong, and pure, to the utterance of the oracle confided to her, was indeed the noblest and highest vocation she could embrace. But it would not do, she needed some more human motive to sustain her. She could have felt capable of every thing, if Lord Melton had been there to approve of it, and sympathise with her actions. But standing alone, with only an abstract motive in life, all was cold, hollow, and dead. She was alone in the world, and all the ties she had endeavoured to weave for herself, had been broken in sunder. Often when she went into private society, and sat in the midst of family groups, saw them bound together by ties of kindred, and of natural affection, and felt herself like Ruth standing "amid the alien corn," a stranger received amongst them from courtesy, from kindness it might be, but having no part nor lot amongst them, no right to take a share in their joys and sorrows, living, like a mendicant, on voluntary affection, without a claim on the love of any one,—the yearning thirst for natural affection, for some one to belong

to, became so intense, that, after an evening spent "in a friendly way," as the phrase is, she would go home and weep bitterly, from the mere sense of isolation. Her position was as brilliant as ever; her reputation, if possible, stood higher. She had acquired a fortune amply sufficient for all her wants; but her whole being was drooping in the glare of her success; her heart was aching with desire for that common blessing, which yet is more precious than life—the natural affection of friends and kinsfolks; which comes from God, and is given when men enter on this weary life, to be a rest and refreshing for them, and that they should not walk through the desert alone.

Bianca did not, however, fold her hands in indolent low spirits; she tried hard to drown the voice of sadness which rose up in her heart with the hum of work: and that sadness was good for her too, for it kept down all thoughts of glorification and self-complacency; the voice of praise could not beguile a soul that was listening for words of affection. She who looked with a species of envy on those women who were occupied with the common duties of home, was not likely to have her heart hardened by a success that set her only further from their daily sympathies.

One day she received a letter from Lady Vernon, who was the nearest approach to what she fancied a relation must be; the letter was as follows, we give it entire :

"MY DEAR BIANCA,—Why on earth do you not write to me a little oftener than you do? but there seems to be a natural perverseness in human nature,

which induces even the best people to stand still, the moment you tell them earnestly you wish them to go on. I believe if I had never told you that I delighted in your letters, and desired to have as many as ever you could write, that I should have been better off—you would not have put me off with such a short allowance; decidedly the broad basis of humanity,—bah! I was going to make you a treatise on metaphysics instead of telling you of my worries as a friend ought to do. I am in a very bad temper, as you will have discovered ere you have read thus far. When I am very cross I always fancy it a symptom of not being well, and dutifully confess it to my medical man along with my other items. My dear! either every thing in this world is very precious indeed (even the things we have despised) or else nothing is of any importance at all, not even those things we have considered the most important; only figure to yourself that at my time of life I have to begin to revise all the ideas that have carried me thus far on my journey! It is as bad as having to suspect my old butler of making away with the plate, or being obliged to turn away my woman who has lived with me for twenty years, at a moment's warning. The same question applies to both distresses—where am I to look for fresh ones? You see one's own convenience is the primeval granite foundation of our nature after all! Well, I am coming to the subject of my letter with the most graceful minuet step I can master, for to walk straight up to the fact of owning myself in the wrong is beyond my virtue. Do you remember that girl who

you said sang so well on that evening, when you went with me to my school?—and have you forgotten how you preached to me that she was a genius, and ought to have her musical talent cultivated? I dare say, also, that you remember how I declared that I would have no singing women in my school? and how I said many more very sensible things? Well, my dear, I am obliged to confess that I was quite mistaken, and to come round to the opinion you then expressed. Ignominious, is it not, to turn all my old ideas about the fitness of things out of doors? However, I cannot help thinking women are happier and better when they are the centre of a home, and can live there contented amongst their duties, leaving the world outside for men to dig and delve, and make a garden of Eden of it, if they can. Still, if God is pleased to give a woman faculties, I suppose she must cultivate them. There will be no successful going against nature, until the Millennium, ‘when the lion will eat straw like an ox’—though I do not think he will much relish it, even then; and the diet evidently would not suit him in the present state of things. I have been attempting to make my lion and my lambs lie down together, and the experiment has failed. You foretold it. I think you offered, in case that girl’s musical faculty grew too strong for me, that you would get her admitted into the Academy—and I would be really glad to claim your promise now. That girl will do no good if she is thwarted any longer. I have kept

her down—put her to severe studies—cultivated her in history and geography, all to no purpose. She is a dunce at all but music; and for the credit of my management, I blush and grieve to say that she made an attempt to run away! Fortunately, she was discovered, as she was scaling the garden wall, and brought back. When questioned as to what she intended to do, she said, ‘Sing in the streets, to earn money to go to Italy!’—a precious prospect, after all our teaching and instruction in the cardinal virtues! It is a clear case, that there is no good to be got by going contrary to such decided tendencies; we must make the best of them, and train them as well as we can. She has always been a good girl in all that does not concern the singing; but she has grown wilful and sulky, and eccentric, of late, so the sooner we put her in the way of following her humour honestly the better. Will you take steps to make all the needful inquiries and arrangements, and write to me, as to what you think will be the best way of placing her. Can you not come down to me for a week? I want to see you very much; and I have been so worried with the affair of this girl, that I really need something pleasant to take the taste of it out of my life. So, finally, in the hope of being helped out of my troubles by you,

“I am, my dear Bianca, ever your friend,

“MARGARET VERNON.”

Bianca laughed heartily over her old friend’s whimsical distress, at finding a musical genius developed on

her hands ; but she was very well pleased at such a good opportunity of putting some theories of her own in practice, about the training of women for a profession. She answered the letter immediately, offering to take the girl altogether off her hands, promising to put her in the way of making herself independent, and to take charge of her in the meantime.

“ I have,” said she, in conclusion, “ your own wholesome mistrust of all patrons and protégés. Those who are very helpless are generally incapable of being helped, they will not walk, but require to be carried—a mode of proceeding very unadvisable. All one can do is to set people in the right way, if they cannot hit upon it for themselves, and then they must use their own faculties for getting along. Still this is a legitimate opportunity for being useful, which I shall rejoice to embrace. I have been very successful in my own career ; I have so much for which I have reason to be very thankful, that I feel a need to bestow on some one else the blessings I have received myself. You have heard me speak of my old friend the actor, who was almost like a father to me in my early life. I could never make any return to him for all his goodness. I must repay my obligation by befriending some one who needs help now as much as I did then. I undertake this for his sake, and if he were alive now he would understand and accept my work. You have no weariness or caprice to fear from me. I am discharging a sacred obligation, and if my efforts in this girl’s behalf bear good fruit, she in her turn will find some one to whom she

may repay the benefits she will have received from me. To be able at the same time to relieve you from an embarrassing charge is a great additional pleasure. I am not going to give her a royal road to success; she must give golden work if she wishes to attain it; but she shall have a good starting point, so that she may be free to apply all her powers to the prosecution of her art, and not have to spend her strength in fighting with sordid difficulties, which wear the life and soul out of one to no profit. She will *begin* at a point which I had to attain wearily, working in the dark upwards out of deep mire. She shall begin in the daylight, I am resolved. Let her come to me at once, I wish to study her powers and her character a little before I take any decisive steps about her. To you I will be always ready to render a strict account of your delegated responsibility. My engagement will terminate in three weeks, and then if you will invite me to Willersdale Park for a holiday, no child would be more delighted to come. I desire to see you once more quite as earnestly as you can wish to see me. I shall look out for this young lady in four days at the furthest. You know my impatience when I once take an idea into my head until I can get it realised, so show some sympathy with my natural impetuosity!

“ Ever your affectionate

“ BIANCA.

“ P. S. What is become of your brother? I have received no letter from him for a very long time, and I fear—”

The words "*I fear*" were blotted out, for Bianca could not frame the sentence.

At the end of a week from the day she wrote the letter to Lady Vernon, that excellent lady's butler arrived at Bianca's house in attendance on a young girl of about sixteen.

They were ushered into Bianca's morning-room, where she was writing.

"Ah! Mathews, is that you?" said she, looking up and smiling on him, "I am very glad to see you; how did you leave Lady Vernon?"

"Her ladyship is quite well, thank you, Miss Bianca, and I hope you are the same. She sent this letter and this young lady under my charge, and ordered me to deliver both without fail into your own hands."

"And how are you, my child?" said Bianca, kissing the young girl, who stood nearly fainting with timidity. "I am very glad to see you—you have not forgotten me, have you?"

"Oh, no, and never shall!" was the reply that came, scarcely audible, through the blushes that burned her cheeks.

"Well, Mathews, you are a capital knight, and have done your errand well. How long can you remain here?"

"Why, ma'am, her ladyship said I was to return directly; but, that if you asked me very much, I might remain over to-morrow."

"Then you are to consider yourself asked quite enough to keep you here. You must make yourself

at home—and I think you will find an old acquaintance down stairs.”

Bianca rang the bell, and her own maid came—the one who had lived with her before the advent of Simmonds.

“Here is a visitor, Agnes, you must take him down stairs and introduce him.”

Mr. Mathews and Agnes smiled on each other, in the best pleased manner possible, and left the room together. Bianca then turned to the young girl, who sat on the sofa, gazing timidly around the room.

“Now, are you tired with your journey? Will you lie down a little before dinner? If you will, come with me, I will show you your room. Do you think you will be rested enough to go to the Opera to-night?”

“The Opera! oh!” ejaculated the young creature, as if a glimpse of Heaven were suddenly disclosed to her eyes.

“You have never seen one?” asked Bianca, smiling at her childlike gladness.

“No, never; and it seems too good a thing to happen to me. I have learnt airs out of ‘Norma’ and ‘Medea,’ and they have been so beautiful, that I thought to see a whole opera, and hear it all well sung, would be the very grandest thing in the world. I used to think about it at night, after I was in bed, and wonder how it would be. I used to be glad when bed-time came, that I might be able to build castles about the Opera.”

“Well, you shall go to-night. This is your room.

You have been taught, by Lady Vernon to be very orderly, and I am glad of it, for I do not like having any but very orderly people about me. I shall come in every morning to see that you do not keep your things in a litter."

"Such a beautiful room! How good you are to me. I will do any thing you bid me," replied the girl, delightedly. The room was, indeed, very pretty, and Bianca had taken some trouble in preparing it for her protégée. The walls were hung with a neat fresh paper; the furniture was painted green, and the curtains were of snowy whiteness. The window looked into the garden, and a splendid American creeper grew almost into the room. There was a dressing-room beyond, which had been fitted up for a chamber of study; it contained a small book-case and a neat cottage piano. The paper and furniture corresponded with those in the bed-room. A neat, plain writing-desk stood on a small table in the centre. The window opened into the garden, like the other. "These rooms are entirely your own; you can come here to sit whenever you are disposed, and you will practise here."

"Oh, I shall be so happy!" cried the girl; "it will be like living in a fairy tale!"

"But your fairy must be hard work, my child; you are not coming here to play. However, just now rest yourself; Simmonds shall come and help you to unpack your things, and put them into the wardrobe. What-

ever you want, apply to her for, if I am not at home. They shall come and tell you when dinner is ready."

Bianca kindly and considerately left the girl to calm herself at leisure, and to get a little accustomed to her new environments before she attempted any conversation. On going to her own room, she found Simmonds at work, and commended the young damsel to her special care.

The opera that night was "Don Giovanni." Donzelli was in London, and singing that season. The house was full, and very brilliant—nothing could be imagined more dazzling than the spectacle—and yet that light and radiance seemed only the appearance produced by some glorious reality beyond. It requires a person to be drilled into life, and to know thoroughly all the pitiful details which go to make up both the decorations and the spectators, before he can lose the idea that they are the utterance and manifestation of some more exceeding excellence; the enchantment is over, when he feels convinced that all the preparation has been to produce an appearance only. To this young girl, however (whose name we may as well say was Clara Broughton), every person in the house, down to the very box-openers, seemed gilded with glorious mystery. They had a box on the first tier, close to the stage. Clara timidly touched the satin curtains, and then touched herself, repeating, softly: "I am here at this minute!"—as if she expected to be spirited away—and she was willing to give some pledge to her me-

mory, that she might be sure she had really enjoyed such blessedness!

At length the curtain drew up, and the opera began. Clara had never been inside a theatre in her life before, and was bewildered between the make-believe of the scenery, and the reality of the actors. But all outward things were speedily to be swallowed up for her, in the entrancing sounds of the music; every nerve seemed strained to the utmost tension, that it might bear the weight of rapture which increased every moment, till she felt that madness must follow the attempt to contain it all. Her senses were too small to comprehend the immense, the unutterable, delight that was placed before them. It was painful to feel that there was so much she could not grasp. At the end of the first act, Bianca was terrified at the wild wrapt expression of her face. She spoke to her, but could obtain no answer—she seemed in a trance with her eyes open.

“I wish you could manage to obtain a glass of water,” said Bianca, to the gentleman who was with them; “we shall be having this child in a fit of apoplexy, if we do not take care. I had no idea she was so excitable.”

“With her musical temperament, it is enough to drive her mad, to come here, if she be not used to such places.”

“She only came from school in the country this morning, and I do not feel to have done at all a wise thing in bringing her; do go and get some water.”

The opera at length ended; Clara drew a long

breath, and threw herself back in her chair. The glittering house, the dazzling spectacle, were now become nothing to her; she was like one who had been gazing on the entrance of Paradise, and found the vista suddenly darkened. She was miserable—as all people are, when a great enjoyment has passed suddenly away from them, broken off with no prospect of return.

When the ballet began she felt nothing but disgust.

“How can the people stay to look at this sort of thing when they have just been listening to music!” cried she.

“Would you like to go home?” asked Bianca.

“Ah, yes, and then I can think of what I have heard!”

The next day was Sunday, and Bianca took her to Warwick Street Chapel, where she attended. There the music was of a different nature, and produced even more effect than the opera. She concealed herself in the pew from all bystanders, and remained dissolved in tears, which alone had the power to give inarticulate utterance to all the emotion that was stirred in her soul. Bianca recollected her own sensations at the first glimpses of the manifestation of her own art.

Bianca determined that her protégée should see every thing that was most remarkable, for as she said to Lady Vernon, “If girls who have been allowed to grow up without unhealthy stimulants can be taken, when their faculties begin to ripen, to see the best performances on the stage, and to hear the best music, it gives an impulse to their intellect, and a development to their

ideas that makes both their existence and their character stronger and more complete."

On this theory Clara was taken several times to the theatres. She saw Bianca act, and once or twice accompanied her into society. At the end of a month she had received a mass of sensations and ideas which it would need many years of life to elaborate and unravel.

One day Bianca went to her room when she was practising. "Oh," cried she, "this is an air I have been trying the whole of the day, and I cannot sing it as I wish, will you listen to it?"

"Willingly," said Bianca.

The girl sang it with an intense feeling and expression, though her voice and intonation were very unfinished.

"Well, there is a quality in that singing I like very much," said Bianca; "but you need a great deal of study yet, and now I want to talk to you a little. Tomorrow you are to begin your studies regularly. You will not go out so much as you have hitherto done; you must earn your right to go into society by your own endeavours. You have a career before you. You have been shown what excellence in the arts is, and you see how much you have to do before you can be worthy to be a companion of eminent artists. Measure yourself always with the highest, and never do less than your best. That has been the only rule I have known through life. Another thing, my dear child, remember, that strong and sterling qualities of character are needed to

make the brightest genius of any more worth than the gold and purple clouds of evening, which turn to leaden coloured mists. People are sometimes apt to think that genius is like the kingdom of Heaven, which, if you have, all other things will follow of course. But, my dear girl, unless you cultivate an iron resolution to follow a purpose once conceived steadily out to the end, an industry and perseverance, which are proof against all self-indulgence, a spirit of loving-kindness and single-mindedness, you will find your genius of little worth, except to lead you into splendid mistakes. You must strive to be a complete and well-balanced character, if your genius is to do its perfect work and to attain its full growth. You have a rich and fertile nature—you have genius for music; therefore, watch over it as a precious responsibility committed to your charge, and know that every time it is desecrated to your own personal glorification its force and quality are deteriorated. You must be faithful to your charge if you would have your genius reach the fulness of its strength. I have given you a long lecture, but recollect it is my own life that I am giving you to profit by. Now let us come down to dinner, and then to-morrow I will give you the plan according to which I should like you to apportion your time, that you may make the most of it."

Bianca was rather stern at times, she felt so earnestly when she had any instruction to give; but no one could be more gentle and affectionate, when there were no principles to be insisted upon.

Clara Broughton had a fine rich nature; the seeds

of good principles and good habits had been already inculcated in her, and with Bianca her intellect was daily developed, and her good habits strengthened. To Bianca it was an intense pleasure thus to watch over and form the mind of this young girl, and to train her for her career in life ; it took her thoughts out of herself, and was a wholesome occupation, by which her own being was strengthened and calmed.

Instead of going down to Willersdale Park for her holiday, Lady Vernon came to her, as she did not wish to break up Clara's regular mode of life so soon ; but it was settled that they should both spend the Christmas holidays there. When Bianca had got the better of her restlessness, and was throwing all her energy into her actual life, and as little as possible allowing herself to

"Sit at Fancy's door,
Calling shapes and shadows to her,"

then, as always happens in life, when one is resigned to going *without* some dearly desired object—it always comes to us.

One fine morning the postman brought Bianca the letter from Lord Melton, she had so long and so vainly looked for ! The contents were every thing her heart could desire, and she felt more contentedly happy than she had ever been before.

When people make a great fuss about "happiness our being's end and aim," it is a very vulgar affair, and rather impertinent to the toiling, busy world, which has plenty of its own complicated affairs to mind.

Still, when any one has worked and endured so long and constantly as Bianca, people are apt to feel rather glad when she obtains a little spell of happiness—she has earned it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR two days Lord Melton remained watching beside Bryant, who lay sometimes in a state of stupor, and at others in delirium. He talked of past scenes, and mingled names and circumstances, some of which, like a touch on a secret spring, revealed to Lord Melton the explanation of Bianca's conduct, which he had so long wearied himself to find.

During the second night, whilst Bryant slept, he again referred to the last letter he had received from her, and which, although crushed and torn in his first jealous fury, he still kept and cherished with a perverse tenacity. He now read it again, and as it seemed with enlightened eyes; for he now discerned all that seemed before so dark in her allusions, and which he had fancied was only her manner of breaking the weight of his annoyance at her intelligence. Now that he saw what she really had meant, he was astonished at his own stupidity and want of faith. But no martyr ever gave himself to the flames with the cheerfulness with which he endured the reproaches of his own conscience; he

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rejoiced in every fresh light he was able to throw on his own harshness and false judgment; he was so thankful to find himself in the wrong, that he would willingly have compounded for a great deal more remorse than fell to his share : no saint was ever so glad to be justified as he was to feel condemned. One only misgiving tormented him, and that was lest Bianca, out of patience at his neglect, should have allowed her interest in him to grow cold. Then that there might be some reaction to this flood of gladness, he began to fear lest from some transcendental idea of generosity, she might have allowed herself to be prevailed upon to join her fate to Conrad's for life, in order to save him from the passionate effects of his remorse; as he was one of those weakly impulsive characters who can neither resist a temptation, nor endure the consequences. He knew that the brightness of Bianca's life had been overcast, and he did not know whether she might not take refuge in a life of austere self-sacrifice; accepting a fate she had once passionately desired, but from which all love and hope had now departed, in the same spirit as other wounded and weary hearts had taken refuge in a cloister. The more he pondered upon this the more probability did it assume. He knew her affectionate heart, and he knew also her lonely and isolated life. He determined that the moment Bryant was sufficiently recovered that he might be left without inhumanity, he would proceed straight to England and see if a chance were still open to him.

During the second night Bryant, who had been for

some hours in a peaceful sleep, awoke; he withdrew the curtain and perceived Lord Melton sitting in a large arm-chair.

"How long have I been in bed? and have you been watching beside me all this time?" asked he.

"How do you feel now? Better for your sleep? Here is the portfolio I got from the carriage, it has not been opened."

These words seemed to cause a spasm of memory to the wounded man.

"Ah!" said he, with a slight shudder, "you are very good to have charged yourself with it; but how fatigued you must be, will you not retire to bed?"

"Oh, I assure you, they have made me up a capital bed in the corner of the room, and I have taken all sorts of good care of myself; but the doctor desired that you might have this draught so soon as you awoke, and you were not to talk. He could not judge of the state of your hand and arm until the fever had a little abated. Are you in much pain?"

"Rather; but it is bearable now. Will you tell me one thing," continued he, with a sort of embarrassment: "have I rambled much?"

"You certainly have had delirium; but what then? words uttered in delirium mean nothing. One might as well catechise a dream. Do not torment yourself whilst you are so weak. Be assured you have said nothing you ought not."

This was intended to tranquillise his mind, although it was not precisely what he would have considered the

truth. He only half believed it, but it was soothing to be told so ; besides, he felt a desire to sleep, and he again fell off into a quiet slumber before he had summoned the energy sufficient to ask any more questions.

The next day, when the doctor came, he pronounced the patient much better ; but two of the fingers of the left hand were so much crushed as to render amputation needful.

Bryant bore the operation with great firmness. When both the doctor and Lord Melton complimented him upon it, he said, with a look of inexpressible gloom, " It is possible, in some cases, to find even severe bodily pain a relief from worse suffering in the mind."

He was again removed to bed, and ordered to be kept very quiet, as his system had not recovered from the shock it had received. Lord Melton continued with him, although it required some self-denial to spend long silent days beside the couch of a stranger, when he desired so ardently and impatiently to commence his journey to England. About three nights after the operation had been performed, Lord Melton was on the point of retiring to rest, when Bryant said :

" Do not leave me just yet ; I have strength to ask you a question now, which I want to have answered out of the road. Will you tell me, as briefly as may be, what stuff it is that I have actually talked during these last days ?"

" What you have said has been very incoherent. I can really hardly give you any account of it. You talked about some lady named Alice, and about one of

your friends, whom you called Conrad, with whom you seemed to have quarrelled."

"And could you divine on what account?" asked Bryant, eagerly.

"You are still feverish and excited," said Lord Melton, "you are not yet able to carry on a connected conversation. You have said nothing that can betray what you would wish to conceal. Do not ask any more questions to-night; in a day or two you will be stronger, and then we will talk as long as you please."

Bryant, with his sensitive suspicious nature, which so seldom opened to voluntary intercourse, felt abashed by this speech, and, turning his face to the wall, uttered a half-sullen "Good night."

Lord Melton saw what was passing in his mind, and considered over the best, the most practicable means of setting him at ease—for, certainly, to come to the knowledge of a man's secrets through the medium of his being delirious, is something like unwittingly reading a letter left lying about.

The next morning, when he went to visit Bryant, he found him embarrassed and reserved; he still felt awkward at the species of rebuff he had encountered the evening before; but he was decidedly getting on very well, his fever was abated, and his hand was doing well. After a few common-place remarks, Lord Melton sat down beside the bed (for Bryant could not yet bear to be moved), and looking at him with his frank blue eyes, he said, after a moment's pause: "If you are well

enough, Bryant, I should like to have a little conversation with you this morning ; will it tire you ?”

“ Not in the least, my lord, I shall be happy to listen to you,” said Bryant, somewhat stiffly.

“ I have been thinking a great deal of what you said last night, and I think I had better tell you frankly how much I have learned from your delirium, and then you need feel no more annoyance about the matter ; but first I shall have to trouble you with a history of some affairs of my own. I am too much of an Englishman to feel at all inclined to talk to every body about private matters;—in fact, it is bad taste, and I know you feel with me on that point; but it will explain to you how I happened to pay any sort of attention to that, which, in another state of mind, you would never have told me. The fact is, that I found myself a party concerned. You mentioned the name of a man I have long known, and your unconnected ramblings threw light on a matter which has cost me great suffering.”

Lord Melton then entered into rather a minute detail of the manner in which Conrad had crossed his path. He compelled himself to go into particulars, in order that Bryant might be relieved from the galling consciousness, that whilst his secret had been surprised, he was utterly ignorant of every particular connected with the charitable stranger, who had shown him a degree of kindness, which, under those circumstances, was rather oppressive. Lord Melton began at the beginning of his intercourse with Bianca, and her engage-

ment to Conrad ; he told him how, in a lady whom she called Mrs. Bryant, and whose name was "Alice," she had discovered her half-sister.

"Ah! that is strange," said Bryant, "and must be some one else—my—Alice, I mean, had no sister, she was an only child ; and, now I recollect, she had a protégée, some young actress, whom she insisted on befriending in spite of my dislike to those sort of people ; and, if she be the same party, she must have imposed upon you by a false tale. Alice would have told me if she had had any such relation."

"Pardon me," replied Lord Melton, "Mrs. Bryant was ignorant of the fact. Bianca, knowing your prejudice against her profession, did not wish to embarrass her sister, and therefore determined not to disclose it until she should have reached such a position as not to discredit her. Subsequently she found, that even her distinguished reputation would not secure her a cordial reception with you ; and therefore, although her whole heart was yearning towards this sister, who knew her not, she had the magnanimity to conceal it. You do not know Bianca, or you would not speak of her in that tone. As to your being ignorant that Mrs. Bryant had a sister, it is very possible ; as, when men marry, and have legitimate families, they are generally silent about former events. Bianca's mother was an Italian lady."

"Ah, that will explain matters," said Bryant.

Lord Melton then went on to tell him all he had suffered, from hearing of the renewal of Conrad's inti-

maey with Bianca, and how the things he had vaguely uttered in delirium, had enabled him to see the meaning of all that had so painfully perplexed him.

"When you know the weight from which your words have delivered me," concluded he, smiling, "I can hardly think you will have the heart to regret that I was here to profit by them."

"You are a good fellow, Lord Melton, and I respect you. Thank you for all you have done for me, and thank you for all you have just said, more than all. If it has done you good, I am very glad you have been here to hear every thing. What you say of Conrad, proves, that he is, what he has always been, a plausible, good-for-nothing fellow, thinking of no one but himself, and bringing sorrow on all who have trusted him. I never knew any good come from those fellows with such a pretence of fine feeling and refinement, yet. What they gain in smoothness they lose in honesty. I remember, years ago, when he first came to us, how he went sneaking after this girl. His father came down and put a stop to it; and, I must say, I persuaded him to get his precious son out of the country. But the girl seems to have been only too good for him."

"Indeed you are right there," replied Lord Melton, "there are few men for whom she would not be too good."

"I should like to hear something more about her if you can tell me. If she were really her sister," but here his voice faltered, and he stopped abruptly.

Lord Melton was glad of an opportunity of speaking of Bianca; he desired to make her worth known to all the world: beside, talking of her was an indulgence he had not engaged for a long time, and he did not need to be asked twice before he began a most elaborate and detailed biography, lengthened with his own comments. Bryant was a very patient listener; to be sure he did not hear above one-half of what was said, but he did not interrupt the narration, and that was the grand point. He heard enough, however, to feel an interest in her: opposite as were their modes of life, there was that in the heart of Bryant which recognised her worth, and responded to her energetic perseverance and strength of purpose.

"Ah!" said he, when Lord Melton at last ceased, "she must be a very remarkable young woman, quite superior to her station. I had no ill-will against her, I wished to do right, and an actress did not seem to me a desirable companion for—but no matter, I see now how mistaken I have been in many things which I thought proper and prudent. If I had known what she was, it might have been the means of avoiding a great deal of misery, but I did for the best; I thought how strange it would seem to let an actress into the family. Nobody else knew any thing of her. I could never endure to have observations made on my actions. She seems to have been a very well-conducted young woman indeed."

The surgeon now came in, and Lord Melton left the room.

"You must not allow your patient to talk much,"

said he, to Lord Melton, when he departed; "the system is very much excited, and he must be kept very quiet."

Lord Melton did not attempt any more conversation during the day, and indeed Bryant did not seem disposed for any. He appeared to sleep a great deal, but he only took that method to disembarass himself from all looks or inquiries. For more than forty years he had been a taciturn, reserved man. Within the last few days all his habits and ideas had been violated, and notwithstanding all his friendly feeling for Lord Melton, he suffered under the painful impression which made itself felt through all the real sorrow that was on his heart, of having lowered himself, of having done foolishly. People of his character are morbidly sensitive of ridicule, the fear and dread of which pursues them to their remotest thoughts, and cramps all spontaneity of action. They are utterly unable to understand impulsiveness of utterance. To make themselves remarkable is their supreme dread; good, true, upright, excellent, as men of this sort are, they are prone to be suspicious, and to take a disgust at the least action that does not appear in the measured formal guise to which they are accustomed.

Bryant, notwithstanding his burst of good-will to Lord Melton, suffered from the reaction of his shy, reserved nature; but the ice was fairly broken, his sorrow had borne down all the petty ideas that once held him in bonds, the desire for human sympathy,—that deep primeval sentiment of humanity, asserted itself; he was

away from England, and all that had been the world to him. The re-action of his old nature subsided.

Lord Melton did not go into his room until the next morning; he sat down and began to converse about indifferent things: particularly he began to make inquiries of Bryant about this district in Bohemia which he had been about to explore, and spoke of continuing his journey in a few days.

"It is very dull for you staying here," said Bryant, "and you have been very good already, but can you not stay, as you are here, until I am able to move, and then we can travel together. I was on my way to our iron mines, which are further in the country. I know the district you mean well, and if I were with you I could show you the country better than you would be able to see it for yourself."

"Why for the matter of that," said Lord Melton, "I do not now think of going at all, for I feel anxious to get back to England."

"Ah! you have something to go back for!" said Bryant, mournfully. "I shall never endure to live in England again."

"I know you have had a great sorrow," replied Lord Melton. "I saw you at Trieste, and felt drawn to you there—although I was far from suspecting we should so soon be thrown together."

"And you have heard what I never thought would be uttered by me to mortal man. My lord, you are a man of honour, and I will not insult you by the request to keep secret all you know. You have told me a

great deal about yourself, and I thank you for your confidence. I feel a comfort in talking to you, I have never known in talking before; and we are mixed up together in a very singular way. I have been thinking a great deal of what you said of Bianca. I am very sorry I never judged of her for myself; but I thought she was artful and scheming, and I took part with old Mr. Percy against her and against his son: but it has come home to me. I did it for the best, as I said before. It would be a great comfort to me to see her now; what is she like?—is she handsome?”

“Extremely handsome,” said Lord Melton, “with black hair, and dark gray eyes.”

“*Her* hair was nearly black too.—Well, my lord, if you marry her be kind to her, and do not let any worldly matter come before her in your mind; women feel such things—they are very tender-hearted, and have nothing to occupy them as we have; and do not hide your feelings from her, do not be ashamed of showing how much you love her. You deserve to be happy; but break off her acquaintance with Conrad, it will do her no good.”

Lord Melton listened in silence, and in some surprise to these expressions: he did not know that, trite and common-place as they seemed to him, they were utterances taught by the sufferings of a life laid waste; that they had been burnt into his soul by an experience the most terrible. Had he known all, he would no longer have wondered at the oracular earnestness with which they were delivered.

"You said, I think, that she had no relations," continued Bryant, after a pause, "that she had been left all her life to struggle by herself?"

"Just so," replied Lord Melton.

"Well, that is a pity. Poor thing, she must have had a hard time of it! Will you let me see her when you are married?—and," continued he, speaking with an effort, "will you tell her that her sister's husband earnestly desires her to consider him as a brother? If she had only left a dog behind, I should have cherished it—much more her own sister," added he, as if to herself.

"You little know the blessing you are sending," said Lord Melton. "I, who know the yearning affection with which Bianca regarded her sister, the desire she had to be known to her, and the generous forbearance which induced her to keep silence, can answer for the satisfaction your kind message will bring to her. You will, you must, return to England, and let her know you, and love you herself."

Bryant shook his head, mournfully.

"My dear lord, I am not a young man, and I have no more strength to hope. My life is broken up. I do not complain,—one must endure whatever is sent to us. Sometime, perhaps, I shall return to England, if I live, and then it will be a comfort to see *her* sister. There are some events that leave one like a mountain shivered to the base; it may look, outwardly, a very narrow crevice, but it goes all the way to the foun-

dition, and nothing can unite it. I am on my way to our iron mines. I shall stay there to superintend them. In that distant place I shall see nothing to remind me of the past. As long as I live, I must be doing something. I do not care for making money now, it is the work I care for. I shall live in the mountains among the miners. Since I have been in sorrow I have thought of many things that never struck me before, especially since I have been lying here. We have many hundred workmen in our employ—we paid them their wages—they did our work—the rest was their concern. I think we should have considered something more than making our money out of them. They are a sad wild set. I have not much faith in benevolent schemes, but I shall see what can be done about them. I can do things for any one but myself just now. I have no plan, but I shall look into their condition a little. When I have the heart to go back to England I shall see what is to be done there. I must live out my days, Lord Melton; and I shall be, I hope, submissive to my Maker; but I do not feel as if any thing could make me either glad or sorry again."

"You shame me, Mr. Bryant," said Lord Melton. "My conscience reproaches me for all the little use I have made of my position and influence. I shall often think of you, and try to follow the example you set me."

"With a happier heart, I trust," said Bryant, smiling mournfully.

In a few hours afterwards he again addressed Lord Melton, who had been writing letters at a little table in another part of the room.

"I have been considering," said he, "that I was very ill advised, and very selfish, to ask you to delay longer. You ought not to write to England, you ought to return thither: now that all your doubts are cleared up, and a faithful heart is awaiting you, do not allow a light thing to keep you from going to claim it. Perhaps, too, she is suffering from your absence. Oh, when there are so many uncertainties in life, do not kill an opportunity of easing the heart of one who is suffering; it may pass away and leave you a remorse."

Lord Melton looked up. "I believe you are in the right," said he, quickly; "you have spoken the word, and I will act upon it. I dare hardly hope in the bright picture you draw, but any way I will go home. I have behaved unkindly; and as you say she may be suffering; I am brute enough to hope that it is so."

"And when will you depart?" said Bryant, not without a pang at finding his words so promptly acted upon.

"Oh, I shall not go until you are all right again. I am not going to leave you in this hole, not half recovered yet. I shall not stir a step until you are able to travel; and then, the day you can proceed towards your mines, I shall set off towards England, as fast as the horses will take me. I have been away, and kept a sulky silence so long, that

a week of absence, more or less, will not be felt. I have written a letter, which I hope will get me forgiven. Even now, I fear more than I hope."

Bryant was not disinterested enough to combat this resolution. Lord Melton continued a fortnight longer; at the end of which time Bryant was well enough to travel. During that period, a warm esteem, and sincere friendship, had arisen up between these two men, so strangely thrown together.

Bryant's whole life had been too rudely shattered to allow of any thing like a feeling of happiness springing up in it—but it seemed less arid and desolate—a friend had been sent to him in a world where he thought himself alone. He felt stronger, and better able to endure his lot.

Lord Melton departed with a heart full of hope, in spite of all he said and thought to the contrary.

"Farewell," said he, as he wrung Bryant's uninjured hand, "and remember that you belong to us when you return to England."

"I do—I will. God bless you for all the comfort you have been to me," replied Bryant.

In a few moments they were both on their several routes.

CHAPTER XXV.

It was now near Christmas, and, in a few days Bianca was to go down to Willersdale Park. Her heart whispered to her, that she would there see again the one being who had for a long time past entirely filled her thought, either as a latent unacknowledged influence, or in the more decided guise of regretful reveries. Even since the receipt of his last letter, she had felt all her doubts set at rest; she knew that he would return the same as he had departed. But after the first gush of joy, she had become restless and impatient. She began to fear that some accident would intervene, to dash down her cup of happiness, now that it was nearly within her grasp. In her hours of sorrow she had often wished that she might lie down and die; and, on the occasion of an epidemic, which carried off a great number of persons, she had looked with a species of envy on the funerals constantly passing the streets. "Amongst so many, why am not I included?" was her regretful aspiration. But now, she was seized with a strange horror, lest her unhallowed prayer of those

“days of darkness” should be heard and answered. She, who had been so brave and patient in times of sorrow, had become a coward during the season of suspense and expectation, which preceded the dawning of her day of hope. Hopes are only inverted fears; but it requires more strength of faith and resignation to the decree of a higher will, to wait calmly the solution of a theory of bright hopes, than to stand firm and resolved under the shadow of threatening ill.

Bianca was not one, however, to allow herself to be lightly carried away by every gust of feeling, and she struggled hard to regain the mastery over her mind, but with very moderate success.

A few days before the one fixed for her departure, the music-master whom she had engaged for Clara requested an interview. Bianca, who fancied that it only had reference to some arrangement about her employment during the vacation, was puzzled to understand the embarrassed tenacity with which he continued in the room after all business had been settled and dismissed. She was impatient for his departure, and not at all disposed to find agreeable conversation to prolong his visit. She relapsed into silence; during which she continued to pack her dressing-case, the occupation she had interrupted on his entrance.

At length the poor man, grown desperate, said, with the perspiration standing on his forehead, “When did you say I might have the pleasure of renewing my lessons to my very talented pupil?”

"We shall be absent a month, and I will write to you on our return."

This was definite enough, but it seemed to convey no intelligence.

"There certainly is one thing I have neglected to inform you of, madam, and that is, my own intention to proceed to Italy early next season. I think, if Miss Clara were to study in Italy, it would be of the greatest advantage to her—indeed it is necessary. She has great talent and genius; I would almost say——"

"I intend her to have every advantage, and I am sorry she is likely to lose the advantage of your instructions."

"I was going to ask, madam, with all deference to your superior judgment, whether you think an attractive young woman ought to appear in public without the sanction and protection of a husband?"

Bianca looked up,—a gleam of the worthy man's meaning (for worthy he was) began to dawn upon her, but she was not going to help him in its development; so she replied, "Well?"

It is astonishing sometimes how little serves for an answer; it is like parrying a thrust in fencing, the least touch diverts the course of a weapon. Bianca's "Well?" served the purpose of bringing a very general proposition into a definite form, though still painfully expressed, as if he were badly off for a language. It was to the effect that he being fully impressed with a sense of Miss Clara Broughton's charms, genius, and virtue, wished to become, in his own proper person, the "husband who was

to give the sanction and protection" required for her appearance on the stage, and that he was most anxious to obtain Bianca's support and influence with Lady Vernon.

"You are aware that Miss Broughton has relations; I can say nothing in this matter, except that I will mention your proposals to Lady Vernon, and speak favourably of you as far as I know. You are older a great deal than Miss Broughton. Have you spoken to her?"

"No—a thousand times no!—for whom do you take me, madam? You are the first to whom I have opened my lips. I can offer the young lady a good position; she might fall into the hands of those who would marry her on speculation for her talents, as heiresses are married for their money. I can offer her a home, and whether her future keeps the promise of the present or not, it will make no difference in my feelings towards her."

"Well, I can give you no answer, except as I said before, to lay what you say before Lady Vernon, to whom I think you had better write yourself."

The good man retired with all the gratitude that such good hopes were likely to excite.

"So, Clara's romance of life seems likely to be soon and safely decided," said she to herself, when left alone; "certainly a worthy, honest, sensible man for a protector will be a great advantage, and smooth many difficulties in her course; but I prefer my own struggles to all the patent safety that could have been secured to me. I wonder what Clara's instinct will be about the matter!"

She, however, resolved to say nothing until she had seen Lady Vernon, and talked over the matter with her.

Lady Vernon was standing in the hall waiting for them, when they arrived.

"My dear child, how glad I am to see you again! both Christmas and the New Year will realise their ordinary 'compliments of the season,' now that you are really come back to me—and is that Clara? Why, mercy on me, how you are grown and improved! you are looking quite womanly. I suppose you have been thriving upon having gained your own way; but, come along, for dinner has been waiting I do not know how long. I have had your own old rooms prepared for you," said she to Bianca, as she led them along the gallery, "do not stay to make any toilet, for we have to keep Christmas alone. I have invited no one. I thought a little real quiet would be a blessing to you."

Bianca, who had been hoping and expecting she hardly knew what, felt a strange chill of heart at these words; all the delight of Willersdale Park had vanished; for a moment she felt as if she had been entrapped into a prison, from which she longed restlessly to escape. Lady Vernon went chattering on in the extremest spirits; either Bianca kept her countenance with wonderful success, or else her ladyship's penetration was not on the alert.

They descended to dinner. The old-fashioned dining-room, ornamented with evergreens, with its oak panels, and rich crimson draperies—the sideboard, loaded with massive plate, all lighted up with a dazzling fire, and a

profusion of lights,—looked like a scene of old English Christmas time ; but Bianca, who had been unaccountably hoping she knew not what, felt a chill disconsolateness at finding that Lady Vernon had spoken the literal truth, and that there was actually no one besides themselves.

“ I have not done you the honour of having a fire lighted in the drawing-room for you,” said Lady Vernon. “ I thought, in this bitterly cold weather, we should be more comfortable in my sitting-room, and there I have ordered coffee ; but I believe it would have broken the heart of Mathews if we had not dined in state. You completely turned his head that time he stayed with you in London. He speaks of it as of the ‘ three glorious days’ of his life. After awhile, I must hear Clara sing.”

“ She has been a very good girl, and made great progress,” said Bianca. “ I am very well satisfied with her.”

Bianca was listening for the name of Lord Melton, to whom his sister had, as yet, made no allusion ; but she continued talking on, about every thing else in the world except the one thing Bianca was sickening to hear. When they reached the sitting-room, Lady Vernon wheeled round the sofa to the fire.

“ There now, Bianca, do you take your own old place, and I will sit here, in Melton’s chair. Poor fellow ! I wonder when he will come back to occupy it again ! I had half a hope that he would take us by surprise, and be here for Christmas ; but he has neither come nor

written. He is making an unaccountably long tour. I do not think that men with large estates like his ought to be so long absent."

"Then you do not know when he will come back?" said Bianca.

"Not the least in the world, my dear, any more than yourself."

There was a pause, during which they drank their coffee; then Lady Vernon, turning to Clara, asked her if she could sing so soon after dinner. Clara went at once to the instrument, and for nearly an hour sang in her fresh rich voice, all the pieces she fancied she sang the best.

"Upon my word she has not lost her time," said Lady Vernon; "I can hardly believe that she is the same Clara I sent to you, half in disgrace, six months ago. You see you were right, my dear, and I was wrong."

The hall-bell at this moment was rung, though Clara's singing had prevented them hearing the sound of wheels along the avenue.

"What can that be?" said Lady Vernon, "at this time of night?—surely no accident at the school-house."

Bianca's heart beat violently—she could utter no suggestion.

"This way, my lord—the ladies are here," said the old butler, flinging open the door.

The next moment Lord Melton, wrapped in furs to the chin, stood amongst them!

CHAPTER XXVI.

"WHAT a perverse fellow you are, Maurice," cried Lady Vernon, when the first greetings were over, and Lord Melton had quietly subsided into his accustomed chair, "you are like all other very good people, who reject the recognised 'arts of tormenting,' but who still contrive to smuggle their desire to be disagreeable into circulation! Here I have been abusing you to Bianca, and saying the wisest things about your long silence, and still longer absence, and you come back to contradict them at the eleventh hour, and force me to feel so glad to see you, that I have not the heart to persist in them; but you have behaved very shamefully all the same!"

"When criminals are condemned to death, the judge always reads them a homily; but when they can prove their innocence they only receive congratulations. You are speaking a speech not set down for you, my lady—I appeal to Bianca whether I deserve scolding?"

The blood rushed to Bianca's face, and her voice

would not for a moment obey her, but she replied at length,

“ Your friends must all be delighted at your return, though they might still have rejoiced had you come earlier.”

Lord Melton did not answer, he began to disturb the slumbers of his sister's Persian cat, which was stretched luxuriously before the fire.

The conversation became general, he had much to tell, and he seemed in high spirits. Bianca was struck with the change that had come over him: he looked much older than when she last saw him, and his ideas were more firmly knit and developed; he did not seem less good and kind than of old, but a latent sternness and determination was perceived through all his sweetness of temper and gentleness of manner. This was precisely the one charm he had always needed to gain influence over Bianca's fancy. She had felt too completely her power over him, now it seemed his turn to assert his ascendancy over her.

Whilst he told them his adventures with a brilliancy and *abandon* she had never seen in him before, or asked his sister a multiplicity of questions on all that had happened during his absence (declaring that he had seen no newspapers for the last six months, except some files of the *New Zealand Herald*), Bianca sat silently listening, intensely happy to be once more in his presence, but still with a vague fear lurking in her mind lest all this disengaged easy talk should portend that he had recovered his freedom. Lord Melton, on his side, made

no attempt to draw her into conversation, or to attract her attention; and although his sister had vacated her place on the sofa beside Bianca, he did not take possession of it.

"People never meet exactly as they parted," said Bianca to herself, as she retired to rest.

She apparently was destined to prove the full truth of her aphorism, for though she could find no positive fault with Lord Melton's manners, still there was an indescribable something about them that did not satisfy her; in fact, in comparing them with what they had formerly been, she fancied he had become more distant and formal than she had ever known him.

The fact might be, that they had fallen out of their old habit of brotherly intercourse, such as it existed at the time of Bianca's long visit to Willersdale Park; but more especially it arose from Lord Melton being fully possessed with the idea that he had Bianca entirely to win, and he was so much afraid of spoiling his cause by being too precipitate in the renewal of his proposals, and, by asking too much and too soon, throw himself further back than ever, that he perhaps fell into the contrary extreme. Besides, he was very well content with the actual posture of affairs, for he had Bianca all to himself, and there was no one to interfere with him, or to excite his jealousy: so they read, and rode, and walked, and talked together as of old, but they were seldom alone, for either Lady Vernon or Clara were generally of the party.

Bianca's heart smote her, when one morning, about a week after her arrival, she found a letter on her break-

fast plate, from Clara's music-master and admirer, desiring, in the most pathetic terms, to know his fate, and entreating her to use her influence with Lady Vernon, to incline the heart of the young lady towards his suit.

Bianca had not exactly forgotten her promise, but she had put off speaking to Lady Vernon, thinking that the man would write himself; and now it seemed that he had, with desperate patience, been awaiting the result of her mediation.

She was aroused by hearing Lady Vernon saying, in her clear, quick tones,

"My dear Bianca, what does all this mean? What is it at all that you ought to have told me, but which you have not told me? I cannot find my way through the mystery of this letter; just look at it, and see if you know who has written it."

Lady Vernon gave her the letter in question, which was from the unhappy music-master, full of expressions of "respect," "anxiety," and "honourable intentions," and begging her favourable decision on the proposals he had the honour of submitting to the Signora Bianca the day before her departure from town, and which she had kindly promised to lay before her ladyship.

"Well, are you as much in the dark as myself?"

"Alas! no," replied Bianca. "I see my own omissions with distressing clearness. If you will come into my room after breakfast, I will explain all I ought to have told you as soon as I arrived."

"Is it a lover of your own who is praying for my good offices?"

Lord Melton looked up quickly from his newspaper.

"No, no," said Bianca, blushing.

"Well, I am all impatience to hear," said the good lady, who, with all her virtues, was the least in the world of a gossip. "So now, Maurice, you must amuse yourself this morning; we are about to hold a cabinet council in our own regions, and shall be invisible till luncheon."

"It is not for me to make any objection," said Lord Melton, rather stiffly, for he felt unreasonably annoyed at not being taken into their confidence. He held open the door for them to pass, and then returned to his newspaper, which he threw aside at the end of ten minutes. He stood over the fire, looked out of the window, and had all the air of a man who does not know what to do with himself;—at length, catching the tones of Clara's piano, he took himself to the music-room.

"Well, now, Bianca, let me hear the history of the mystery," said Lady Vernon, seating herself in a comfortable bergère on one side of the fire-place, having first arranged a small table for herself, to hold her many coloured wools. Bianca took possession of the couch opposite; but she did not employ herself to any purpose, she only pulled a piece of packthread into every species of entanglement.

"Our correspondent is the music-master I engaged for Clara; he professes to be attached to her, and to wish to marry her. I promised to lay the case before you, and to say all the good in my power of him. You

see it is as prosaic a piece of business as possible. I thought that I had better speak to you before I disturbed the child's young head with the affair. She suspects no more than your worsted work."

"Well, but, my dear, let me have full particulars. To have that girl well married, would be an infinite relief to my mind, for ever since there has been a chance of her singing in public, I have felt responsible for all that may befall her; and to know her in the hands of a good, sensible man, who will take care of her, would take away half the objection. To me, there seems something revolting in an unmarried girl singing in public. I mean nothing disrespectful to you, my dear—you are an exception to all rules to the contrary."

Bianca then went into a more detailed account of the affair.

"How old is he, and what sort of a looking young man is he?"

"He is about thirty, and what most people would call rather handsome. A light German looking young man, with a very kind, amiable face."

"So far, so good; if she can fancy him I think it is quite as good a match as she can reasonably look for. So, finally, I think we should tell the child and hear how she stands affected; and although she has no parents, she has relations, who ought to be consulted."

"I have some letters to write," said Bianca, "so I will leave you here, and send Clara to you. Poor child, she seems very young to have her destiny sealed for life!"

"My dear Bianca, do not be romantic! if she dislikes him she shall refuse him, but for the rest she may be very thankful to marry a steady, sensible young man who can take care of her. I have seen a great many love matches in my time, and they have none of them turned out so well as to make me anxious to see a young woman in whom I take interest, marry headlong for love. Girls at her age can get up a fancy for any one."

Bianca went to the library to write her letters; on the way she met Clara, and sent her to Lady Vernon, glad to get the responsibility removed from herself.

Whilst she was writing Lord Melton entered: she did not perceive him, and he flung himself without speaking on one of the couches where he could watch her movements in a large mirror.

She wrote letter after letter; Lord Melton lost all patience, he thought she would never stop; the scratching of her pen on the paper irritated his nerves until he could bear it no longer. He exclaimed pettishly,

"Who on earth are you writing so many letters to, Bianca?"

She turned round in surprise at the sound of his voice, she could not see him as he was hidden by the back of the sofa. He arose as he spoke.

"Ah!" said she, "is that you? I did not hear you come in; how long have you been here?"

"For a long time. I intended to wait patiently until you had finished, but it seemed as if you were about to write on to all eternity, and I was listening for

every stroke to be the last. Who can you have to write so many letters to?"

"Most of them are on business," said Bianca, "I have neglected every thing since I came here. My holiday will be over soon, and I must think about work."

"So you wish to get away?" said Lord Melton, bitterly. "Do you know, Bianca, it is a very great failing of yours, that of never being easy unless you are moving about."

"I assure you I never felt so little inclined 'to move about,' as you call it, in my life."

Lord Melton's heart beat violently; he did not speak, but began to walk up and down the room;—at length he came and sat down at a little distance from her.

"Bianca!" said he, in an unsteady voice, "a long time ago you said you loved me as a sister; that will not content me; tell me, are you still the same?—can you give me nothing more? I cannot go on in this way. I cannot live as we have lived together, since I came home. If you cannot give me any hope, tell me so, and I will trouble you no more."

He did not dare to look at Bianca, who trembled too violently to speak.

"Answer me, Bianca. I will not be importunate; I know you will mean what you say; but give me one word."

Still Bianca did not say that word. She could not utter a sound, although her lips trembled.

"Bianca!" cried Lord Melton, in a tone of passionate

entreaty, "I do not ask you to speak—only give me your hand, as a sign that I may hope."

Bianca placed her hand tremblingly into Lord Melton's. "I will be any thing you wish," she said, "only do not leave me again."

Lord Melton could hardly believe the evidence of his senses—he was giddy with joy.

"But, Bianca, do you love me?—or is this only your generosity, that cannot bear to give me pain?"

"No, no!" said she, in a low voice, "it is not generosity. I know now, that my whole soul is bound up in you. It would kill me to lose your love."

"But it is not as a brother you love me?" persisted he. "I wish there were no such relation to deceive one! Will you ever tell me that I am your brother again?"

"What would you have?" said Bianca. "You possess my whole soul—every thought I have is yours. I cannot tell when I began to love you—it has come like daylight. When you were so long absent, and so long without writing to me, I suffered very much. I feared lest you should have wearied of me, and left me. I found, then, that you were part of my life. I have been quite unhappy enough about you to satisfy your utmost scepticism, that at last I do love you as you desire to be loved! You deserve that I should tell you all this," said she, looking at him through the tears that were blinding her, with an expression of radiant happiness, like sunshine through a silver mist. "I

have made you suffer as well as myself ; but until you were gone, I knew not how much you were to me. Do not leave me again—let me belong to you, so that nothing may ever part us more !”

Lord Melton drew her towards him, and whispered,
“ That nothing may ever part us more !”

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY TERNION went to the library to take Bianca's portion of the letter she had written to Mr. Meyer (which, by the way, was the name of Clara's adviser), and as to the communication she had made to Clara's uncle, but she found the room vacant; she then went to find her in her own sitting-room, but with equally little success. The bell rang for luncheon, but neither Lady Ashton nor Bianca made their appearance. Clara, who had considered—on turning over the new prospectus she was now holding in her hand, and to find out whether she really would be in love with Mr. Meyer. She fancied she should greatly prefer Lord Richard; and wondered whether he "deserve any thing" by coming into the nursery, and listening to her, whilst she practised the machine; and thought how very handsome and fascinating he was, as compared to every one she had ever seen except to her life.

Accordingly, Lady Ternion found herself left comparatively alone, which rather surprised her, as, in that moment, she felt herself much in need of that woman's

true consolation—a long confidential gossip about the events of the morning.

The first dinner bell rang, and yet no one appeared; but, whilst she was dressing, a tap was heard at the door; it was Lord Melton's servant, who came from him, to request that her ladyship would allow him to come to her dressing-room for a few moments' conversation before she went down to dinner.

"Certainly," cried Lady Vernon, who overheard the message; "say that I shall be disengaged in five minutes."

Her "five minutes" were of reasonably conscientious length for a woman finishing her toilet—that is to say, not more than ten elapsed before she entered her dressing-room, where she found her brother, who declared he had been waiting there more than half an hour.

"My dear Maurice, where have you hidden yourself all the morning? and do you chance to know what has become of Bianca; but," cried she, looking at him with surprise, "what good news have you heard that makes you so radiant?"

"Something that I hope you will consider as 'good news,' too, Margaret—Bianca has consented to become my wife; and all that is needed to my perfect happiness is, that you should feel as happy as I do."

Lady Vernon could not reply for an instant, then she said:

"You know how anxious I have always felt for your marriage, but I always doubted whether you would

find a woman to deserve you. Bianca is a noble creature; and though I do not like actresses, and I wish she had been any thing else in the world, still you may feel very proud to have won her. I love her as if she were my own daughter; and you, both of you, have my best blessing!"

The old lady then fairly burst into tears; as, somehow, people are always prone to do, when they hear that a dearly loved relative is about to marry: but she soon dried her eyes, embraced her brother, and went off to Bianca's room. She found Bianca, who had not begun to dress, sitting before the fire, rather anxious as to the first effect of Lord Melton's communication; she knew the good lady's family pride, and she had a vague fear that the almost overpowering happiness of the morning must be shaded by some mortal mixture of disappointment, but all shadows vanished before the maternal kindness with which Lady Vernon pressed her to her heart. For a minute both were too much overpowered to speak.

"God bless you, my dear child," said she, at length, "I am glad to have you for a sister, though I shall always feel more as if you were my daughter; Melton has told me every thing; he deserves that you should make him happy."

"I who have been alone all my life, am finding all my kinsfolk in one day," said Bianca, leaning her head on the old lady's shoulder. "I will be your sister or daughter, or any thing you will. I cannot love you more than I do. You have been all goodness to me,

and now you are still adding to it;—tell me again, will you have me for your sister?"

"Indeed, yes, my darling," said Lady Vernon, taking Bianca's face between her hands and kissing her forehead. "Maurice may be thankful to gain you for a wife, and I am glad to receive you into our family," concluded she with affectionate dignity.

"Now, my dear, you must come to dinner, it has been waiting at least two hours, never mind dressing."

"I will not be a second," said Bianca. "I shall be dressed by the time the bell has been rung."

"Well then, I will leave you, to see what has become of that child Clara."

The dinner was at last actually on the table. Mathews, the old butler, and one of Bianca's most devoted admirers, had somehow penetrated into the secret; he considered that he belonged to the family, and had a right to take interest in all that concerned it, and there was something almost paternal in the attentions he bestowed on Bianca that day. Nobody talked much, but it seemed as though they spoke to each other without words, for no one felt silent. Poor Clara soon found all her vague fancies about Lord Melton scattered like mist; and she, with that spider-like instinct which is very strong in mankind, especially in the young, began to weave reveries almost as bright of which the attainable Mr. Meyer was the centre.

It had been arranged by Lady Vernon that Clara should go to spend a few weeks with her uncle and aunt, and there Mr. Meyer was to come and make his suit

in person, for as the old lady sagaciously said, she would be much more likely to view him dispassionately when seen from her own level than when she was liable to be dazzled by the accidental position in which she found herself at Willersdale Park. In the course of a few days a most satisfactory letter came from her uncle, who was a veterinary surgeon in a market town in Essex; and under the escort of Mathews, Clara once more took a journey. She was to spend the remainder of the holidays with her uncle, and then go up to town to Bianca. Clara's affairs once off her hands, for the present at least, Lady Vernon became very anxious that her brother's marriage with Bianca should take place without delay, in which idea Lord Melton quite coincided. Bianca pleaded for time to acquit herself of her professional engagements. The point of time was stoutly contended, but in the end Bianca found herself obliged to yield, especially when Lady Vernon said,

"My dear Bianca will not, I am sure, refuse the first request made by her sister; which is, that she will not again appear on the stage, now that she belongs to us."

"So be it, then," said Bianca, gracefully; "arrange all as you wish it to be, and I will be conformable."

"That is being a good child!" said Lady Vernon; whilst Lord Melton, as in duty bound, expressed all the gratitude it was possible for man to feel.

* * * * *

Three weeks afterwards, all the newspapers contained announcements of the marriage of "Viscount

Melton, of Melton Hall, in Staffordshire, and of Fort Vernon, in Scotland, with the celebrated actress Bianca." As Parliament was not sitting, and there were no very exciting public events going on, the public were not deprived of any particulars, from the bride's veil of Honiton lace, down to all sorts of anecdotes and incidents of her professional career, as many biographical sketches as could be collected, criticisms on the different characters in which she had appeared, estimates of her genius, tributes in prose and verse to her virtues and accomplishments, with bitter lamentations for the irreparable loss the stage had sustained from the abdication of its high-priestess,—all which was the only drawback to Lady Vernon's complete and entire contentment at the event, which was celebrated at Willersdale Park.

As her own marriage so much sooner than she had anticipated, put it out of Bianca's power again to take charge of Clara, Lady Vernon obviated the difficulty by promising to receive her until some other arrangement could be made. Clara soon spared every one any further anxiety about her by an ecstatic letter to Lady Vernon, in which she declared her profound affection for Mr. Meyer, and stated, that with the approbation of her friends, she had accepted him, and that they were to go to Italy immediately. Clara's cup of happiness seemed brim full. Bianca felt half afraid that the journey to Italy had some share in her enthusiasm for Mr. Meyer; but Lady Vernon declared that it was a very promising looking affair, and a letter coming also from

her uncle, in which he expressed his perfect approbation of the match, and a great deal of gratitude to Lady Vernon for all her kindness, Bianca resigned herself to letting matters take their course. She made Clara a present of all the furniture of her house in Brompton, and sent her a splendid wedding-dress beside. Lady Vernon, also, gave her a handsome present; and Clara was married, and departed with her husband for Italy with as bright prospects as any young woman could desire.

Bianca and her husband proceeded to Fort Vernon, intending to reside for some months there.

It is a great mistake to suppose that genius is shown in one special mode of manifestation alone;—it inspires its possessor, and enables him to feel equal to all situations.

Bianca might have been born to her new position, so easily she sustained her dignities, and so well ordered and appointed was her household.

One evening, about ~~six~~ months after their marriage, Bianca and Lord Melton were in the library at Fort Vernon. It was a splendid room; the ceiling was panelled with emblazoned escutcheons and armorial bearings, the walls and book-cases covered with black oak carvings.

“Full of fancies, strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver’s brain.”

Lord Melton had been reading aloud, whilst Bianca was working a cushion in crochet for Lady Vernon. The fading light, which was rendered still more dim by coming through the panes of curiously stained glass, prevented him continuing his employment. He ceased

to read, and silently watched Bianca, as she strove to finish the row she had begun, in spite of the increasing gloom. He stirred the fire, and the flashing light danced on the gorgeous ceiling, and the quaint dark mouldings round the room.

"Bianca," said her husband, as if he were asking the most ordinary question in the world, "in how many former states did you live, before you came into this world? I have never mentioned it to you, but I have been wonder-struck at the prudence and dexterity with which you have adapted yourself to what must be such a new order of things—the orderliness, the—what shall I say?—house-keeping qualities, which have developed in you are so marvellous, as to make you seem what the Scotch folks would call 'not canny.'"

"Why, you Turk, you heathen, you unbelieving Jew!" cried Bianca, flinging down her work—"is this positively the first time you have discovered that I am a clever woman? You are like all the rest of men, and have no faith in a woman's genius, until it is shown in the practical manifestation of arranging your breakfasts, dinners, and servants. There is no wonder in the matter; the simple secret of filling any position, great or small, consists in just giving your mind to see and understand what are the peculiar requirements of it, and in doing them heartily. But with all that," continued she, looking at him affectionately, "you cannot think how it pleases me to hear you say that I manage my house well, and that you like what I do."

"Bianca! will you tell me one thing?" said he, after a pause. "I may be 'a curious impertinent,' for asking; I ought, perhaps, to remain content with my present blessedness, without seeking further; but still, will you tell me, did you love Conrad as much as you love me?"

"No," replied Bianca, firmly. "He would not have permitted me to love him as I love you; he would always have been putting himself between us. I should have always been struggling to follow my own nature—to be, in short, what I am now—and he would have been tired to death, and I should have worn myself out in the attempt to make his affection what I desired to find it—to make it what alone would have satisfied me. I should not have discovered until it was too late, that it was not in his nature to be what I desired; not until I had broken myself against the irremediable incompatibility of our characters; in the end, I should have been forced to recognise that I possessed a larger and more devoted nature than his own, which would have been an entirely fatal thing to me, for a woman can only love when she fancies that on the whole the object is endowed with a greater and nobler character than her own. It may be that she possesses individually more beauty, more genius, more brilliancy, than the man she chooses; but there must be a preponderating character in him. She must find in him something that supports her best and noblest impulses, and which strengthens her weakness. I should not have found this with Conrad. I have had oppor-

tunities of studying his character well since the days when I loved him; he had sympathy with nothing but his own arbitrary notions. Instead of being able to live easily and freely beside him, all my strength would have gone in efforts to avoid collision, and to obtain marks of affection; till, wearied and worn out, I should have ended by making him as wretched as myself. I can see now how well it is for us that we are not allowed to choose our own lot in life. I tremble when I think of all my own headstrong wilfulness. We are none of us, or to speak more modestly, *I* am not, wise enough to be trusted with my own wishes."

"Then you are happy with me, Bianca?" said her husband.

"Upon my honour I am too contented to know whether I am happy or not. I have never thought about it. I only know that I would endure again all that horrible uprooting of my life, which at the time seemed as if it must tear the very soul out of me, and endure as much more added to that as nature might support without losing her hold on life, if in the end I might be as I am now, to know you as I do, and to possess the priceless treasure of your love. It was good for me, necessary for me, that I should suffer all that horrible anguish. My love for you grew out of that chaos, from the wreck of all on which I had built myself up. Oh, if we could only have faith enough, at the time we are suffering, to resign ourselves to the will of Him who orders all things, to take His will for the best and wisest; and 'though he slay us to trust in Him,' it would be the true, the only wisdom. I am humbled to

the dust when I think how little I have deserved all the happiness that has come upon me. I would not now for all the world have been without that great sorrow, although at the time it well-nigh overwhelmed me. Sorrow is our matriculation in humanity, and no one who has received its mysterious baptism would ever wish to have been spared what has been laid upon him. My love for Conrad was true and devoted; my whole life was bound up in him at the time, and it kept me from much evil: but I could not give up my idol; and when it was taken away I had no faith to trust a Higher Will, and that made my suffering."

"But," said Lord Melton, "if you had ceased to love Conrad, how could you show such devoted kindness to him in his sorrow? You must have had some love for him remaining, or I should not have had the instinct to feel so jealous."

"It was a different sort of thing altogether," said Bianca; "the feeling had completely changed its nature, and there was nothing of which you need have been jealous."

"That I believe, now; but how how could I feel sure at the time? We are all wise enough after the fact. Do you know where he is now?"

"I do not. He completely broke all connexion with the world, and I suppose he is still working out his idea of expiation, and of wearing away the remorse that consumed him."

* * * * *

It might be about a fortnight after this conversation that Bianca said one morning at breakfast:

"In spite of all the fine things I said the other even-

ing about the vanity of wishing, I have fallen a victim to it myself."

"Well, tell me what it is about, and then we shall see if it be possible to compass it?"

"I want to go to Italy. It is my own country, and I should so much like to see it again. Will you take me there?"

"We will see what can be done towards winter; at present, I must live at home a little."

"Ah, yes!" said Bianca, remorsefully; "and when I think that it was I who banished you for so long, I feel glad to suffer a little of the penalty; but you will take me some time? I feel a yearning to go there I cannot express."

It was not likely that Lord Melton should thwart such a very moderate desire of his wife's. They went to Willersdale Park in the autumn, to pay a long-promised visit to Lady Vernon; after which they were to proceed to Italy.

On their journey from Scotland to Willersdale Park they remained all night at Newcastle. When Lord Melton entered to breakfast in the morning, he found Bianca sitting so absorbed in a play-bill that she did not perceive his entrance.

"What have you found to interest you so much?" said he, looking over her shoulder.

"How strangely things come about in this world!" said she. "Mr. Simpson and his company are performing here in all their glory; this is a bill of their performance for to-night. This is the very town where

my mother fell ill. Conrad and Mr. Simpson extricated me from my distress. It was the first time I ever saw Conrad, and he spoke Italian to me, and seemed like an angel from heaven. I have lived out that romance, I am going back to Italy which I had then just left, and here comes Mr. Simpson to witness my exit in the same way as he presided over my entrance on life in England. All rounded in ten years! it seems like a dream!"

"It is a singular coincidence," said Lord Melton. "What is this Mr. Simpson like? I should rather like to see him."

"And so should I, very much," said Bianca; "he really was a very good man in his way, and very kind to me; he might have been my father, only he paid me so ill; and he had so much real feeling and zeal for his calling. I would go and see him, only—"

"Only what?"

"Only, that I know him to be quite capable of exhibiting me in a grand transparency, and getting up a drama on my romance of real life! No, I know him too well to venture to glorify him in any such manner; but, if you will come out with me, after breakfast, we will buy the most sumptuous breastpin to be found, at any jeweller's in the town—I know his taste—and I will send it as an anonymous tribute to his genius. Now, I am quite sure you must have finished your breakfast, so come along."

As they were proceeding up one of the principal streets in the town, they encountered a grand equestrian

procession, the rear of which was brought up by Mr. Simpson himself; not on a lofty phæton, as of old, but in a magnificent private carriage, almost worthy of a lord mayor, and drawn by eight beautiful horses.

“Look! look!” cried Bianca, “that is Mr. Simpson; he is a little older than he used to be, but he is very little changed. I dare say he has set up the carriage because he considers that it looks more patriarchal than his former resplendant phæton. I wonder whether his wife be living still—I would send her something too. Is not our identity a strange thing?”

They had now reached a jeweller’s shop, and Bianca chose the most radiant brooch she could find, as a present to Mrs. Simpson, and a very handsome gold snuff-box for the hero himself. She desired that they might be sent forthwith to Mr. Simpson’s lodgings. She wrote, herself, on the envelope, that they were the gift of one who had sincere respect for his character, and admiration of his genius.

“I wish I could be by, to see his astonishment,” said she, laughing, when they got out of the shop. “I can just fancy him; and then how happily and complacently he will settle down in the conviction, that the dawn of his fame has arisen!”

“Well, my angel, but we shall be late; the carriage will have been waiting an hour.”

* * * * *

After remaining a short time with Lady Vernon she went to Italy, to her birth-place, but Bianca found no one living there who remembered her. At

Milan they saw Clara and her husband — both supremely happy. Clara's voice kept its promise ; and, with the instruction she was receiving, there was every reason to expect that she would take the lead amongst English singers on her return, and raise the credit of the English school.

Bryant came to England, and paid Lord Melton and Bianca a visit. He never rallied from the deep depression of spirits which Alice's death had left: he continued to superintend his vast mining concerns, but it was for the sake of ameliorating the condition of the workmen, which seemed the only object in which he felt any interest. His clear sagacity and business-like habits enabled him to be very useful to Lord Melton, in his plans for the improvement of the peasantry on his Scotch and Irish estates. At first, Bianca seemed to awaken many painful recollections, and he avoided her ; but afterwards he grew very much attached to her.

Conrad never re-appeared in the world. Some years after her marriage, Bianca received a letter in an unknown hand, informing her of his death. It was from one of his own sect, who had been desired by him to communicate the fact to her. He had fallen a victim to typhus fever, which was ravaging the courts and alleys amongst which he was constantly pursuing his mission.

Lady Vernon lived to a good old age, and her school flourished to the last. After her death Bianca continued it, and set up others on its model.

Lady Vernon left all her fortune, with the exception

of some legacies and annuities, to her brother, with directions that it was to descend to his younger children. Bianca and Lord Melton lived long and happily together ; every year seemed to increase the perfect union between them. They had several children, who inherited the sound character of their parents.

If the reader insists on a moral being tacked to the end of a story, to save him the trouble of extracting it himself, we can find nothing better than those words of Shelley.

“ Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,
These are the seals of that most firm assurance,
Which bars the pit over Destruction’s strength;
And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length,
These are the spells by which to re-assume
An empire o’er the disentangled doom.”

THE END.



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